

Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research
University of Algiers 2 Abou El Kacem Saadallah
Faculty of Foreign Languages
Department of English



**The Manifest Destiny of the American Antihero: Regenerative
Violence in Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* and Chuck Palahniuk's
*Fight Club***

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the LMD
Doctorate Degree in Anglo-Saxon Cultural Studies

Submitted by

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Academic Year 2021/2022

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the substance of this thesis is entirely the result of my investigation and that due reference or acknowledgement is made, whenever necessary, to the work of other researchers.

Selma DJABALLAH

Signature:

Date:

Dedication

*To my late Professor Foued Djemai and my daughter Myriam,
the purest of all souls.*

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Abstract

Popular culture has gradually been enriched with invaluable contributions and intellectual worthiness, ushering this burgeoning phenomenon into the academic world of literary and cultural studies. This research examines the role of popular fiction in assessing, criticizing and inspecting paramount aspects such as the American Manifest Destiny. Ergo, the present thesis leads a comparative study between Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* (1969) and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996). The aim of this inquiry is to evaluate the progress of the portrayed antiheroes, represented by Michael Corleone and Tyler Durden, in their attempts to delegitimize the Manifest Destiny. Specifically, this study is based on French philosopher Jean François Lyotard and his considerations of cultural narratives – such as that of the Manifest Destiny – as a “metanarrative” that accentuates the incredulity of postmodernism. Moreover, this research uses Richard Slotkin's theory of “Regeneration through Violence” to relate the violent frontier archetype to the regenerative violence inscribed in the Manifest Destiny. The analysis also relies on John G. Cawelti and his concept of “Formula” that provides proper value to the arts of popular culture. The research findings reveal a progressively radical attitude – both in terms of the tools employed and the goals intended – in delegitimizing the myth of the Manifest Destiny. They also suggest that this reformist stance reflects a new awareness of an evolving American audience. Finally, the concluding results stress the ability of popular culture in construing a dynamic formula of cultural resistance.

Keywords: American Antihero, Delegitimation, Legitimation, Manifest Destiny, Popular Culture, Popular Fiction, Regenerative Violence.

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the violent attacks against the United States Congress on January 6th, 2021, American comedian, Stephen Colbert, during the melancholic monologue of his *The Late Show*, ponders: “Remind me, are we great again yet?” Evidently, Colbert’s rhetorical question invokes former President Donald Trump’s presidential campaign slogan “Make America Great Again.” This rallying cry is, admittedly, copied from President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. The implication, however, remains the same: America was and will be constantly and unfailingly remade “great.” This spirit of majesty and splendor is derived from the cultural myth of the Manifest Destiny, reflecting a self-absorbed nation that proudly and selflessly draws the lines of “Exceptionalism.” This discourse is universally transmitted and implemented through well-designed knowledge forms, among which are the spurring powers of American popular culture.

Popular culture avails the reiteration of the Manifest Destiny narrative. Through its artistic expressions, it reinforces the American proclaimed ideals of virtue, divine choosing and regenerative powers. Eminently, these paradigms are usually enacted by the American hero; comic books impose him as a superhero in the fight against evil; Hollywood movies celebrate him as a savior in the fight against terrorism and literature depicts him as a moralizer against spiritual decadence. Perceived from this angle, one could only surmise that popular culture has nothing to offer but a mere accentuation to an already engraved narrative of American perfectibility. Nevertheless, this burgeoning cultural phenomenon is undoubtedly proving itself as a force to be reckoned with. Lurking within the shadows of revolutionary endeavors, its growing forces are perpetually challenging conventional standards, including that of the almighty American hero.

An incipient growing attitude within popular fiction forms is employing the antiheroic model to disturb, challenge and expose the discourse of the Manifest Destiny. These attempts are best exemplified by Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* (1969) and Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (1996). Both authors build their protagonists as dark and vicious antiheroes who master the art of crime and,

ultimately, succumb to their violent impulses. Nevertheless, it is evident that through these characteristics, the Manifest Destiny, as a political, social and cultural doctrine, is exposed for its fatal nature. As the antihero crudely and fearlessly denudes the truth from its historically fictitious inaccuracies, the antiheroic path usually reveals the verisimilitude of the implemented narratives. The herein sampled novels display a progressive process of these antiheroic disclosures: while Michael Corleone is immersed in a destructive destiny he struggles to conform to, Tyler Durden, for his part, is consumed by an intrusive destiny through which he attempts to regenerate.

Previous works have rarely considered these two protagonists within an American cultural frame; rather, they have mostly treated them as nuances who surrender to an unbearable social pressure. While the ethnic discriminations are unmistakable, Michael Corleone is often scrutinized for his Machiavellian leadership and his callous crimes. Tyler Durden, for his part, is dissected as an apathetic anarchist who voices the narrator's psychological malaise. The present thesis derails from this perspective to approach these antiheroes from another angle; one that sanctions a meticulous investigation on the cultural peculiarity of their paths and the environmental reasons abaft their resort to violence. Consequently, we wonder about their ability – and by extension that of popular culture – to dismantle the perfectibility of the Manifest Destiny. Furthermore, both *The Godfather* and *Fight Club* respectively mark the prevalence of the postmodern era; the former denotes the ascendancy of postmodern attitudes while the latter designates a more advanced state of the postmodern situation at the turn of the new century. Evidently, the lapse of time between the two contributes to the evolution of resistance against American cultural discourses from late mid-century to its final instances. Thus, as the postmodern condition progresses – or rather retrogresses, – we wonder how this process is intensified through a more gruesome depiction of popular fiction. *The overall aim of this research is to evaluate the progress of antiheroic attempts to delegitimize the Manifest Destiny in twentieth century materialistic America.*

In order to answer this research problem, a set of intricate questions dictate themselves: How do Michael Corleone and Tyler Durden relate to the myth of the Manifest Destiny, attempting to abide by, expose or destroy its elements? What do these attempts unveil about the state of violence inscribed in the Manifest Destiny? When do the paths of these two antiheroes divert while achieving this mission? More importantly, what do their efforts reveal about the worthiness and ability of popular fiction – and popular culture in general – in delegitimizing such a monumental American concept? In order to reach a clarifying answer to all these questions, this thesis is based on a particular structure of conceptual and theoretical framework. First, since the Manifest Destiny is such a colossal concept – touching upon the mythical, doctrinal and discursive foundation of the American nation and comprised of an infinite number of self-proclaimed ideals, – this research is limited to three standards put forward by William Earl Weeks: virtue, divine election and regenerative frontier experience (Week 60). In other words, within the limitations of this research, the Manifest Destiny is defined as a system of thought by which Americans claim to be divinely elected by God to lead a virtuous destiny and regenerate the civil state through peaceful frontier missions.

In order to highlight the efficiency of popular fiction in engendering a discourse of resistance, this thesis is based on – and adds to – the academic contributions put forward by scholars and researchers. Some of them have explored the same aspects proposed herein; while a few others exhibit particular gaps which require more attention. To that effect, a literary review assembles the key ideas related to this research area. *The Godfather* and *Fight Club* engendered extensive criticism on both the novels and their cinematographic adaptations. As these narratives are still assessed and analyzed in several academic departments, the most recent and relevant critiques have been selected. The hitherto chosen critics present different perspectives and point of views. Instead of approaching their materials according to the chronological order of their publications, a thematic classification is preferred in order to discern their arguments and compare their standpoints.

Concerning Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*, most criticism is focused primarily – and at times exclusively – on the depiction of the Italian-American ethnic minority through the criminal institution of the Mafia. Within this target, critics are interested in the portrayal of masculinity and ethnicity and the social etiquette these two elements create in the American society. To begin with, in his book *Screening the Mafia: Masculinity, Ethnicity and Mobsters from The Godfather to The Sopranos* (2010), George S. Larke-Walsh treats *The Godfather* as a source of inspiration for several following mob narratives. He analyzes the structure, myths and intertextuality found in gangster novels and movies. To that effect, Walsh focuses on the link between masculinity and ethnicity within the Mafia institution to designate the precise pattern upon which a narrative like *The Godfather* is assembled.

Fred Gardaphe, for his part, accentuates this focus on ethnicity and masculinity. He joins Walsh in defining Vito Corleone and his son Michael as the archetype gangster characters. In his book *Leaving Little Italies: Essaying Italian American Culture* (2004), he presents a detailed history of the contributions made by Italian Americans in media, cinema as well as fiction. In the section analyzing their literature, he depicts Puzo's *The Godfather* as a narrative which enables the American civilization to develop further, nourishing the social fabric with more ethnic diversity. In his second book entitled *From Wiseguys to Wise Men: The Gangster and Italian American Masculinities* (2006), Gardaphe believes that the depiction of masculinity is a specific characteristic of Italian American literature. He labels Michael as the “bona fide cultural hero” who redefined the ethnic considerations of American heroism. While both Walsh and Gardaphe admit that the novel is more representative of American popular culture than previous mob stories, their studies fail to demonstrate how it is precisely formulated and incorporated within American cultural and social paradigms.

To amend this lack of criticism, Christian Messenger, in his *The Godfather and American Culture: How the Corleones became our Gang* (2002), places Puzo's narrative within the bowls of American culture. As the scholar makes of *The Godfather* and its cinematographic adaptation the centre of his academic career, he demonstrates how the novel presents a new set of values of family love, communal unity, honor and respect. Messenger describes the relationship between America and the Corleone Dons as "Godfather America," insinuating that both Vito and Michael emanate from the heart of American culture, and consequently, participate in its making. The scholar uses Roland Barthes' studies on mythologies to place them as American mythological symbols. For instance, he qualifies the actions of Don Vito Corleone to Barthes' "mythical speech" which transforms any linguistic sign into a meaningful signifier; thus, enabling us, the "reader-critic," to position the characters according to American historical and cultural discourses. To that effect, Messenger's insights parallel the aim of this thesis which attempts to depict how Michael Corleone abides by the American Manifest Destiny.

Fight Club, for its part, attracts the attention of critics mainly towards the issues of consumerism, violence and masculinity. Even more feverously than *The Godfather*, *Fight Club* accumulates more negative reviews on account of its male-oriented plot, emasculation and alienation of women. In his "Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders: Fight Club, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence" (2001), Henry Giroux criticizes *Fight Club* as a text against itself. He considers violence as a mere expression of frustration resulting from a process of emasculation. He claims that the novel mocks the soft side of feminism and attempts to restore male superiority through physical exhibitions of virility. Moreover, Giroux considers "Project Mayhem" as a "barbaric fantasy" which shifts the sociological frustrations into the physical sphere instead of the intellectual one. Finally, the scholar denies any cultural implications which could position Tyler Durden at the center of political, social or cultural representation. He, thus, deems that the cultural and political message of *Fight Club* is contradictory, failing to generate an "enlightened form" of social change.

Assenting Giroux's standpoint, Kyle Bishop, in her "Artistic Schizophrenia: How *Fight Club's* Message is Subverted by its own Nature," insists that the novel deals, almost exclusively, with gender identity, violence and alienation. Through her Marxist criticism and film theory, she explains how the narrative fails to transmit the message it endeavors to. Bishop joins Giroux in asserting that the story "suffers" from the same sense of schizophrenia as its protagonist displays. Both of them accuse *Fight Club* of advocating the same postmodern pitfalls it claims to furiously criticize.

To contradict these views, Tom Harman, in his published PhD thesis titled "The Transformation of Masculinity in Late Capitalism: Narratives of Legitimation and Hollywood Cinema" (2013), considers *Fight Club* from another angle. First, Harman contradicts Giroux's negative views by confirming that the critic had already set his own definition of what is politically right and wrong. Politicizing the narrative according to subjective opinions has clearly affected Giroux's critical outcome. More importantly, Harman insists that *Fight Club* is basically a "movie about thought" rather than a manifesto for a social revolution. Ergo, the novel does not claim to provide pragmatic solutions to postmodern issues, among which consumerism and emasculation emerge most emblematic. Instead, as a first step towards any form of change, *Fight Club* awakens the reader to his own state of disintegration. While Harman's study focuses primarily on masculinity, his consideration of social and cultural forms of "legitimation" aligns with the purpose of this thesis in denuding the Manifest Destiny from its pretentious "metanarratives."

Indeed, all of these scholars and researchers have provided valuable materials to analyze and evaluate Mario Puzo and Chuck Palahniuk. Their contributions have enriched the field of literary criticism, especially in regards to popular fiction and popular culture in general. To the best of my knowledge, however, no recent study has ever jointly contemplated the two writers nor considered Michael Corleone and Tyler Durden together as antiheroic commentators of an American cultural disintegration. According to popular belief, popular literature is often marginalized for its commercial nature or

deemed too inferior for any significant consideration. The humble originality of this particular thesis lies in its attempts to concoct Michael and Tyler within the cultural elements of American civilization by evaluating their subjugation to and rejection of the Manifest Destiny. This would not only shed a new revealing light on this doctrine, but it would also endeavor to prove the worthiness of popular fiction in tackling and reevaluating the cultural mold of America. Moreover, popular fiction is stereotypically perceived as a mundane form of art, providing a momentary distraction to entertain a disengaged audience. By comparing the two antiheroes, this research tries to discern the pattern of defiance within popular literature that aims at dismantling paramount concepts, among which is heroism and the Manifest Destiny. By underlining the evolution of antiheroic oppositions, it intends to confirm the progression of popular fiction in establishing a formula of cultural resistance.

It is imperative to mention that this thesis considers the Manifest Destiny as a timeless concept born with the conception of the New World as the haven of success and freedom. It surpasses the transitory period of Westward expansions in the nineteenth century to denote a peculiar perception of a divine right to explore geographical and mental horizons. As the West is magnified to this extent, the frontier experience stands for a perpetual belief in heroic missions to regenerate humanity. To that effect, this research considers the valuable insights of French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard as the first leading theory. In diagnosing the postmodern condition, he defines the “narrative knowledge” that controls scientific and cultural discourses as “metanarratives.” These “metanarratives” represent the excess of narratives through which certain practices are justified under a “process of legitimation.” Case in point, the Manifest Destiny is hither considered as a “metanarrative” within which the narratives of virtue, divine election and regenerative frontier legitimize capitalist practices and violent carnages. Evidently, this represents the core of Michael and Tyler’s mission; delegitimizing the metanarrative of the Manifest Destiny to propose a more truthful depiction of this founding myth.

The comparison between *The Godfather* and *Fight Club* is maintained by the second leading theory of “Formula” proposed by John Cawelti. As a devout supporter of popular culture and its establishment in the academic world, he composes his concept of “Formula” which is comprised of “conventions” and “inventions” to designate the progress of popular fiction in introducing revolutionary prospects. While Michael Corleone presents the conventional depiction of a capitalist, unholy and violent destiny, Tyler Durden attempts to invent a new anti-consumerist, man-made and chaotic destiny. This thesis will also refer to Richard Slotkin’s theory of “Regeneration through Violence” to relate his analysis of the violent frontier archetype to the regenerative violence inscribed in the Manifest Destiny. Since this research navigates through literature and civilization – as the two are indivisible – a few other postmodern theorists are referred to to fulfill this compound task, among them Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Joseph Campbell and Robert Bly.

This thesis is composed of four main chapters. The first chapter entitled “Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations” provides an elaborate overview of the concepts and theories upon which this research is built. It is divided into two main sections: the first one presents the concepts of the Manifest Destiny, the Antihero, Popular Culture and Popular Literature; while the second section introduces the theories of “Formula” by John Cawelti, “Metanarratives” by Jean François Lyotard and “Regeneration through Violence” by Richard Slotkin.

The second chapter, entitled “Delegitimizing the Gospel of Death,” focuses on the capitalist character of the Manifest Destiny and aims to expose the narrative of ‘virtuous’ destiny under a culturally-based criminal capital. It is divided into four main sections. The first one presents a brief summary on both novels. The second section comments on the “soulless” state of capitalism and its depiction in *The Godfather* and *Fight Club*. The third section uncovers the discourse of “legitimation” as employed by Michael and Tyler to expose a criminal capitalist destiny. The fourth section leads the comparison between the two contexts of the narratives to follow the process of delegitimizing the Manifest Destiny.

The third chapter, “Desacralizing the Divine Destiny,” which is divided into three sections, demonstrates how Michael and Tyler try to divest the Manifest Destiny from its religious narrative. Their unholy path – which constitutes their ungodly destiny – is detailed in the first section. Furthermore, to dismantle the heroic discourse of the Manifest Destiny, a reference to the altered position of female characters from defenseless to saviors is exhausted in the second section. Lastly, the progression of these delegitimizing attempts is compared to the context of *The Godfather* to that of *Fight Club* in the third section.

The last chapter, “Violence and the Regenerative Frontier,” is based on the insights of Richard Slotkin to uncover the means employed by the archetypal Frontier in fulfilling his Manifest Destiny. It is divided into three main sections: the first one investigates the concept of sacrifice in relation to the violence employed by Michael and Tyler; the second section elaborates on the antihero frontier and his practices of violence, allowing him to regenerate the essence of his destiny. The last section completes the comparative process by analyzing the state of violence and its limitation in a postmodern context.

Chapter One:
Conceptual and Theoretical
Foundations

This first chapter, entitled “Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations,” endeavors to present the concepts and theories upon which this thesis is built. It underlines the basic structure which will guide the analytical process of the entire research. It is divided into two main sections which respectively deal with concepts and theories. The first one explains the concepts of the Manifest Destiny, the American antihero, popular culture, and popular literature. The second section focuses on the key theories used to maintain the remaining chapters; including John Cawelti’s theory of formula, Jean François Lyotard’s theory of metanarratives and Richard Slotkin’s theory of “regeneration through violence.” Additionally, each section elaborates on the methodology adopted in dissecting Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* and Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*.

I. American Conceptual Landmarks

This first section attempts to explain the timeless concepts in American culture which still define and shape the postmodern context. It is sub-divided into four sections: the first one provides an overview on the Manifest Destiny, its creation, main themes and perennial nature; the second one defines the American antihero and examines his rise as a favorite literary character. The last two sub-sections, for their part, elaborate on the phenomenon of popular culture, popular literature, and their ascendance to academic recognition.

1. The Manifest Destiny Through Time

This sub-section humbly attempts to condense the historically and culturally grandiose concept of the Manifest Destiny into a concisely useful overview. This historical landmark begins as a vision of freedom and justice in a barren land and matures into a national spirit characterizing the American social and imperial policies. A historical journey is first provided in order to investigate its origins within the Puritans’ explorations of the New World. Then, its development into a thematic triad of virtue, divinity and regeneration is explained at length. Finally, an argument is elaborated on its timelessness within the construct of the American nation and its representation in artistic works.

1.1. A Journey through History

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the United States had been escalating an international scale of prosperity as the new world power. In a brief period since independence, the nation seemed eager to expand its horizons and increase its dominance. By then, most Americans still lived east within the boundaries of the original thirteen colonies (Weeks 59). During the 1820s, however, pioneers, traders and speculators started to push west and south in search of “fertile territories, commercial opportunities, and speculative profits” (Weeks 60). The rapid growth of the United States engendered “unbounded confidence” in the future of the country, creating a sentiment of “divine destiny” in the American experience (Weeks 60). According to William Earl Weeks, a professor of history at San Diego State University, it appeared to be “America’s sacred duty to expand across the North American continent, to reign supreme in the Western Hemisphere, and to serve as an example of the future to people everywhere” (Weeks 60). Ultimately, this was the Manifest Destiny of the American people.

In 1844, a New York journalist named John Louis O’Sullivan coined the term the “Manifest Destiny” in his attempt to justify the annexation of Texas and predict the future of the American nation. He published an article in *The United States Democratic Review* in which he stated:

other nations have undertaken to intrude themselves... in a spirit of hostile interference against us, for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfilment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions. This we have seen done by England, our old rival and enemy; and by France, strangely coupled with her against us.. .And whosoever may hold the balance, though they should cast into the opposite scale all the bayonets and cannon, not only of France and England, but of Europe entire, how would it kick the beam against the simple, solid weight of the two hundred and fifty, or three hundred millions—and American millions—destined to gather beneath the flutter of the stripes and stars, in the fast hastening year of the Lord 1945! (O’Sullivan 5)

O’Sullivan asserted that America was destined to face the hostility of its enemies and fulfill its mission of spreading its seeds throughout the continent. Increasing the size of the nation was meant to upsurge the power of the Union, and Texas was annexed by the approval of its population in December 1845 during John Tyler’s presidency (Cunningham 8).

O’Sullivan’s catchy phrase had a more powerful impact on the annexation of Oregon six months later. He emphasized his previous claims by stating:

Our claim to Oregon is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us. (O’Sullivan 7)

Oregon represented another territory to advance American ideals of liberty and democracy. O’Sullivan confirmed that this mission is particularly destined for Americans: “America is destined for better deeds... Yes, we are the nation of progress, of individual freedom, of universal enfranchisement” (O’Sullivan 426). From that point forward, the Manifest Destiny became a powerful concept, as ordered by “Providence,” to pave the way for success and progress.¹

1.2. The Triad of the Manifest Destiny

According to Weeks, the American Manifest Destiny consistently reflects the following three key themes: the “special virtue” of the American people and their institutions, the “destiny under God” to accomplish this task and, finally, the destiny to regenerate, “redeem and remake” the world (Weeks 61). Under the triad of virtuous, divine and regenerative destiny, the Manifest Destiny developed as a national mythology, functioning as an unstoppable engine to increase the nation’s power and hegemony. In reality, however, these three elements legitimize a well-designed system of thought that relies on heroic

¹ For further information on the process of annexation led by the United States of America during the nineteenth century, students could consult Thomas R. Hietala’s *Manifest Design: America Exceptionalism and Empire* (1985). Hietala explains how territorial expansion increased America’s imperial power; each state added to the Union’s wealth, power, and security. He focuses his study on the influences the Manifest Destiny had on international political relations, as well as frictions within the Democratic and Republican political parties. He asserts that these past historical events, related to the Manifest Destiny, continue to define national identity, character and purpose.

pretences to sanction its criminal capitalist interests and violent frontier confrontations.

1.2.1. The Virtuous Destiny

The American nation proclaims the universal values of integrity, uniqueness and virtue. These traits imply a distinctive role attributed to the American people who presume to be entitled and destined to expand and change the world. As virtue is generally defined as a thoughtful conformity to a standard of righteousness and morality, it denotes a particular selfless and moral excellence which prioritizes the spiritual wellbeing of humankind. This “self-congratulatory portrait” of unique virtue – extensively used in media and presidential campaigns – usually conceals a critical calamity of “US hypocrisy.” This could be exemplified by the “possession of nuclear weapons, conformity with international law” or, more importantly, the propagation of unregulated and atrocious capitalism through which the nation increases its power under the disguise of virtuous destiny (Walt, *The Myth*).¹

Under the narrative of selfless and virtuous missions to spread its institution, the American nation has been legitimizing its material gains. In an interview led by journalist Paige Blankenbuehler with Amy Greenberg, the historian confirms that: “the Manifest Destiny is not this benign force. It’s an ideology that’s been mobilized in order to justify a lot of bad stuff” (Greenberg, *Advanced*). The survival of the Manifest Destiny remains a vital part of the American cultural and political structure, providing moral justifications for abnormal conducts in local affairs or imperial conquests.

The Manifest Destiny carried the motto of capitalism at heart as it provided new economic possibilities that followed capitalist ideals. Daniel De Leon³

¹ This is an e-text; therefore, page number is not available.

³ Daniel De Leon was an American socialist, politician, lead editor, and a Marxist theoretician. He is credited with creating the first American socialist political party in the early 1890s, initiating by that a libertarian Marxist movement called Marxist-De Leonism. He was also the forerunner of revolutionary industrial unionism which prompted a militant struggle for a republican structure in the favor of the working class. For more information on his work and legacy, check the Marxist Internet Archive.

believed that the American proclaims his Manifest Destiny “to be the conquest of foreign lands, and he sets up vice as a pillar of the capitalist system, all in the interest of capitalist morality. He knows that the conquest of foreign markets is the only escape from domestic shipwreck” (De Leon 2). Evidently, the need to make more profit through westward expansions eventually conquered the American spirit, and Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* became a biblical manual for personal and financial conduct.

American cultural critic and historian Richard Slotkin confirms that beyond the expansionist endeavors lies “a world of unappropriated abundant resources” which was free from the restrictive rules of the established order (Cvrtila 4). This movement is, according to him, would certainly ensure economic development (Slotkin, *The Fatal* 41). Undoubtedly, this progress is not restricted to a simplistic increase in population and productivity; rather, it is accompanied by “shifts in the status and power between classes,” creating divergences at the social level (Cvrtila 4). As the Metropolis would increasingly be industrialized, this would progressively feed the capitalist growing powers, provoking social violence, revolutions and wars (Slotkin, *The Fatal* 44). Thus, the Manifest Destiny would symbolize a meaning beyond its territorial expansion; one which would continue to shape American socioeconomic and cultural foundations for centuries to come.

The Manifest Destiny became “proportional” to capitalism where each phase of American history provided new possibilities for economic accomplishments and created new outlets for the growth of the *Homo economicus* model.¹ Eventually, the Manifest Destiny became synonymous to material success; industrialization and the building of railroads, the material

¹ The theory of the *Homo economicus* denotes a metanarrative of human existence based on economic impulses; the human being is a rational self interested individual with the natural right to be free from interference. It explains the world and its evolution on an economic contract based on give/gain or produce/profit correlation. In this case, this metanarrative extends from the micro to the macro level, in which every personal relation, social structure, historical or cultural experience is layered on the pressure of economic grounds. This theory has been around since the development of neoclassical economic studies and, more specifically, in the writings of John Stewart Mill. It has been discussed and intensely studied by several schools including social sciences, psychology, sociology, anthropology, history and political sciences (Urbina & Villaverde 65). More elaboration on this particular point will follow in Chapter Two.

opportunities of the Gilded Age and the glamorous success of the robber barons inspired Americans to accumulate wealth and riches as part of their ‘destiny.’ The Manifest Destiny matured even further in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with the development of industries and business corporations. The need to make profit and secure the path of material success became a pillar in the function of this timeless concept.

Thus, since the early settlements in the New World, the Manifest Destiny prompted Americans to use all means possible to push their capitalist agendas and dive into a quest of wealth accumulation (Paul 320)¹. Garry Adelman, director of History and Education at the American Battlefield Trust, confirms that “America’s path to a Manifest Destiny hasn’t changed from the time of the Colonies, namely, a heroic-scale Indian war pitting race against race, property there for the taking, providing the windfall profits to underwrite the expansion of capitalism” (Adelman 7). As a compensation for their sacrifice in redeeming the world, Americans believed it was their Manifest Destiny to take and consume at any price. This belief was effectively used to validate the Indian Removal Acts in the 1830s – a legislation that alienated the Natives from their lands and helped clear the way for expansionists (Cunningham 10). The same process is witnessed in the globalized form of the Manifest Destiny in which the American imperial ruling is used to engulf the natural resources of the supposedly distressed nations. Evidently, this destiny – and the resulting profits – is perceived as a bidding task for it executes God’s commands and his divine election of America as the new hope of humanity.

¹ In his book *The Myths that Made America: An Introduction to American Studies* (2014), Heike Paul proposes a chronological order of the different myths that constructed, and still reinforce, the American national character and identity. His sixth chapter entitled “Agrarianism, Expansionism, and the Myth of the American West” brushes on the concept of the Manifest Destiny and its role in boosting the sentiment of exceptionalism. His study extends from Christopher Columbus and the “myth of discovery” to the “myth of the self-made man.”

1.2.2. The Divine Destiny

The Manifest Destiny, a concept deeply rooted in American culture, embodied the ideals by which the nation was born. O'Sullivan's speech, based on religious aspirations, crystallized the early settlers' hopes for the New World. The early Puritan pilgrims planted the seeds of a utopian country during the exploration of its barren lands. O'Sullivan himself admitted that he only defined an existing concept:

our national birth was the beginning of a new history, the formation and progress of an untried political system, which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only; and so far as regards the entire development of the natural rights of man, in moral, political, and national life, we may confidently assume that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity. (O'Sullivan 426)

The settlers believed that God chose America to “embrace” its ‘manifest’ and self-evident destiny and exercise a moral responsibility for the rest of humanity to follow. This entails that the Manifest Destiny was born with the creation of a “new history,” setting a model of perfection for the rest of the world to adhere to. Thus, it would represent a much deeper concept than territorial expansion, symbolizing the futuristic vision by which the United States of America was foreseen.

Weeks confirms that notions of divine destiny had existed from the time of the Puritan settlements of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. America's special virtue and its presumed mission to regenerate the world rested upon the belief that God had elected and destined the United States for this special role as the “redeemer nation” (Weeks 62). John Winthrop's famous sermon in 1631, that the Puritan colony represented a “city upon a hill” from which the “regeneration of the world might proceed,” established an ideological foundation for “grandiose pretensions” (Weeks 61).

According to Donald Scott, a Professor at the University of Chicago, the idea of divine election for a special destiny witnessed a crucial transformation with the American Revolution and the establishment of the United States as a secular nation. With the adoption of the constitution, the country was devoted to

its special role as the “the beacon of liberty and democracy to the world” (Scott, *The Religious Origins*).¹ As part of its ambivalent nature, America is formally a secular nation with a “deeply religious” society, sustained by the notion of divine supervision.² Though the Constitution clearly prohibits the establishment of an official religion, the Manifest Destiny remained awash in religious aspirations, proclaiming a sanctified mission to be the new “city upon a hill.” While such expressions were secularized, the spirit of the Manifest Destiny remained on a divine decree which has constantly provided “a deeper resonance” to American Exceptionalism (Scott, *The Religious Origins*). Evidently, the uniqueness of the New World lies in its moral responsibility and regenerative frontier experiences to save others and guide them through the path of righteousness.

1.2.3. The Regenerative Frontier

The exaggerated sense of “national virtue” engendered a collective awareness of a mandatory mission which stipulated that Americans were destined to redeem and regenerate the world according to their principles of freedom and democracy. This duty would be manifested in a series of frontier experiences through which America would spread its institutions and remodel the progress of human race in the image of the United States. A prominent misconception affirmed that humanity was in a desperate need of a regenerative frontier, overlooking the precise means applied to achieve this process of regeneration (Weeks 62).

The Manifest Destiny would eventually give birth to the myth of the American frontier;³ the outward adventure from the Metropolis towards the Wilderness. Expansionism towards the West engendered a new narrative that recounts the merciless, harsh, and unpredictable wilderness. American historian

¹ This is an e-text; therefore, page number is not available.

² The United States is considered as a secular nation in which religious diversity propagates; nevertheless, various scholars point at a powerful and unifying “Civil Religion” which is peculiar to the American nation. According to Scott, “Civil Religion” is a “particular form of cultural nationalism to which all “true” Americans, whether native or immigrant born and whatever their personal religious beliefs and affiliations, were expected to adhere” (Scott, *The Religious Origins*). Evidently, this reinforced the myth of American Exceptionalism regardless of personal faiths and beliefs.

³ More elaboration on this particular point will follow in this chapter.

Frederick Jackson Turner,¹ most prominently in his 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” places the westward journey as a key factor in the history of the new nation which not only enlarged the geographical area, but also contributed to the spreading of American ideals and institutions. To that end, he insisted on the role which the frontier played in exerting and advancing American democracy.

In Turner’s beliefs, the West is not just a specific region or place; it is rather a dynamic space of the frontier which represents “the meeting point between savagery and civilization” (Turner 2). Moreover, this journey, according to him, would certainly separate the American people from their European roots, creating a unique frontier experience towards what he called the “Great American West.” Thus, the crossroad of civil state and brutality evolved from a geographical region into a mythical sphere to crystallize the frontier experience as a destiny proclaimed by all Americans.

Furthermore, exploring an impoverished land helped Americans to build a more factual bond with it, constructing a stronger connection to the soil and progressively eradicating their European roots. As their objective entailed the full discovery of their country’s new horizons, it made them feel more mothered and attached to it. Evidently, this journey was thought to be blessed by the divine order of God, which spared no limits of borders to explore, resources to consume or means to employ. Researchers Abdelkarim Bouchefra and Khaled Belhadj from the University of Tlemcen state: “All travelers were expanding and part of the spirit of their destiny, a belief that the Will of God that Americans spread across the entire continent, observe and deploy the country as it sees fit” (Bouchefra & Belhadj 20). Thus, the Manifest Destiny was a God-given order that related territorial expansion to the “achievement of progress” on the personal and national level.

¹ Author of *The Frontier Thesis* in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner is credited for being among the first historians to focus on American history outside of its European influences and colonial origins. For further information on his work, students could check *The Turner Thesis Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History* by Earl Latham, George Rogers Taylor, and George F. Whicher (1949).

Evidently, these expansionists had to find the appropriate method to deal with the Native Americans. These ‘savages’ represented a disincentive in the expansion endeavors; as a result, they were treated as an enemy who obstructed the accomplishment of their Manifest Destiny. Slotkin explained how the wilderness was “humanized” under the influence of the white Christian while the Native American was constantly “dehumanized.” This opponent had to be exterminated, which eventually culminated in America’s worst human genocide of indigenous people (Cunningham 16). While the frontier experience created a “positive atmosphere” and an idealistic prospect of human development, it also revealed the dark side of the Manifest Destiny which emphasized the white man’s belief in the virtue and sanctity of his violence.

According to Weeks, the Manifest Destiny forced the removal of approximately 125,000 Indians who still inhabited the lands of the Southeast (Weeks 63). This process epitomized the true “motives and contradictions” of this doctrine. The “dispossession” of the Native Americans relied on an appeal to biblical scripture as a justification, arguing that the fertile lands of the Southeast were reserved for the “cultivators of the earth” (Weeks 63). This particular conduct discloses the realities behind the redeeming frontier experience in which the integrity of the humankind – from all races – ought to be preserved. As this legitimizing narrative is still applied in global imperial conquests, it confirms the Manifest Destiny as a timeless concept of capitalist and violent expeditions.

1.3. The Manifest Destiny: A Timeless Concept

As part of its enduring effects, the Manifest Destiny played a crucial role in the development of American Exceptionalism as an ideology; that sentiment of superiority and uniqueness that would characterize the American mind and shape the political, social and economic future of the nation. Thomas Byers, a Professor from the University of Louisville, states:

American exceptionalism is a doubly teleological vision, in which all of history prior to the formation of the Euro-American "New World" was pointed toward this formation as a goal, and in which that "New World" is not simply a place, but a mission... American exceptionalism is not only the claim that America is different, but that it is unique, one of a (superior) kind - and generally that that kind carries with it a unique moral value and responsibility. (Byers 86)

American Exceptionalism developed into an ideology that would determine the Americans' perception about themselves and their mission towards the rest of the world. Eventually, this would prompt American imperialism and preemptive wars in the following centuries. Americans would come to think of themselves as the Christ-nation sent by God to rescue the less fortunate, spread peace and democracy and save the human race from the atrocities of tyranny.¹

The ideology of American Exceptionalism proves that the Manifest Destiny is, indeed, a timeless concept, born with the discovery of the New World and still instilled as a cultural engine that fuels national and political policies.² Its survival through centuries of American history confirms its "absolutizing" power as a political and cultural doctrine. It, therefore, exceeds the simplistic definitions of Westward territorial expansions to represent a state of mind that embodies American proclaimed principles of success, progress, justice and freedom for all human races.

¹ For more information on American Exceptionalism, Godfrey Hodgson's classic *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (2009) provides a profound investigation on this particular issue and follows its roots and development from the Puritans' settlements, the War of Independence, the Civil and Cold War to the globalizing world order in relation to foreign policy. He admits that American history has always been "selective" in circulating a discourse of "exceptional virtue" and exaggerating narratives that force the American people to believe in deceptive and unholy truths. A parallel analysis could be drawn from Thomas R. Hietala's previously mentioned book.

² According to Scott, the idea of America's virtue, "chosenness," providential destiny and regenerative mission still shape the political decisions at home and abroad "to this day." This notion was used to justify the Spanish American War and its imperialist goals (Scott, *The Religious Origins*). It was also invoked by President Woodrow Wilson and President Franklin Roosevelt to call all Americans to fight and make the world "safe for democracy." Similar to this, President George W. Bush considered himself to be an "agent of divine will" when he defended his policies in Iraq by "invoking the idea that it is America's duty and destiny to conquer terrorism and to secure democracy for Iraq and help spread it to other nations of the Middle East" (Scott, *The Religious Origins*).

This argument is not approved by Richard T. Hughes, professor emeritus at both Pepperdine University and Messiah College, who considers the Manifest Destiny as a temporary doctrine which served its purpose of territorial expansion towards the west. In his *Myths America Lives By*, he explains:

I choose not to treat manifest destiny as a foundational myth of the United States for one fundamental reason. The myths under consideration in this book are myths that have continued to define the American character since they first emerged at some particular point in American history. In contrast, the doctrine of manifest destiny served a very specific purpose—the goal of westward expansion—and therefore flourished for a short time, namely, the second half of the nineteenth century. (Hughes 168)

Hughes admits that the Manifest Destiny meets the requirements he has laid out for the notion of myths America lives by. Moreover, he confesses to the “fruits” of this doctrine in terms of political policies; however, he chooses to consider it, not as a “foundational myth,” but rather as a “civic faith” that effectively traced a provisional period in American history. Evidently, as much as Hughes is entitled to his opinions, many other scholars believe that the Manifest Destiny represents a “complex of ideas and emotions,” a state of mind that shapes the personal path of every American individual and from which all other American myths emerge and persist.

The Manifest Destiny is responsible for creating the binder of American history. As cultural philosophy, it still generates a spirit of American superiority through which Americans insist that their divine mission is impelled by “forces beyond human control” (Lubragge, Manifest).¹ Michael T. Lubragge, from the University of Groningen, insists that:

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American history was built on a chronological record of significant events, each event having a cause and subsequent effect on another event. Historical events are presented in history as being tangible, being tied to a date, or an exact happening. Manifest Destiny on the other hand, is a phenomenon. It cannot be tied to a date, event or even a specific period of time. Manifest Destiny existed and still exists as the philosophy that embraces American history as a whole. Manifest Destiny is an intangible ideology that created American history. In its simplest form, Manifest Destiny can be defined as, "A Movement." More specifically, it would be the systematic body of concepts and beliefs that powered American life and American culture. (Lubragge, *Manifest*)

According to Lubragge, the Manifest Destiny is a state of mind peculiar to the American nation. It is an ever-lasting discourse that adapts to the parameters of each era. The Manifest Destiny fostered a body of American concepts that forged the American identity and history. Thus, it could be considered as a source from which a variety of American myths emanate, including the myth of the Chosen Nation¹ and the Myth of Nature's Nation.²

Thomas R. Hietala, a professor of history at Yale University, considers the Manifest Destiny as a myth which continues to play an effective role in America's domestic and foreign relations. It is solidly used as a "euphemism" to disregard the realities of the past – including the genocide of Native Americans, slavery and deforestation. This has maintained a void in historical experiences, and left generations of Americans unaware and susceptible to ignorance and, often, arrogance (Hietala 271). Weeks joins him in accentuating the creation of a "transcontinental empire" that led, as an "inescapable prelude," to hegemony in the twentieth century. According to him, the US dominance over the world is itself "a measure of the extent to which historians have internalized the myths of Manifest Destiny" (Weeks 8). Evidently, the timelessness of the Manifest Destiny is also portrayed in the world of literature through multiple artistic

¹ A concept rooted in early Puritan belief that they were God's chosen people to save the world through a dictated path of righteousness, the myth of the Chosen Nation stipulates that America is divinely chosen for a "special destiny" to spread ideals of freedom and democracy (Hughes 147).

² The Myth of Nature's Nation asserts that America rules through a "natural order" set by God and bestowed upon the American nation. Gaining popularity in the Revolutionary Period, this myth claims that God himself based his order on the American land and gave its people the divine right to manifest their destiny throughout the rest of the world (Hughes 70).

representations which depict American personal experiences and narratives as heroic missions blessed by God to redeem the world.

The Manifest Destiny in its literary and cinematographic representation was usually depicted through personal journeys under the narratives of the frontier myth. Territorial expansion, the conquest of wilderness, spreading American ideals, taming and saving the savage Indian by Christianizing him were the main themes in many plots, most notably, James Fenimore Cooper's *The Leatherstocking Tales* (1827) and Western movies in the late nineteenth century. As the context progressed, material success, wealth accumulation and climbing the social ladder came to represent the capitalist nature of the Manifest Destiny. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), or *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath (1963) portrayed the aspired materialistic frontiers of the new generation.

The classical artistic representation of the Manifest Destiny relied on one executioner: the American hero. The target of literary criticism is usually directed towards the pattern of the American hero in fulfilling his Manifest Destiny. Hence, all additional characters in literary (or cinematographic) works enhance his position and glorify his journey. This thesis humbly proposes another approach by focusing on the antihero's path in implementing his own Manifest Destiny. His rise to popularity, psychological characterization and ultimate aspirations are part of the following sub-section.

2. The Evolution of the Antihero

In order to form a more valuable comprehension about the position of the American antihero and his rise to popularity, it is necessary to first define the concept of the hero, his mammoth esteem and his demise in American culture. The contrast his literary characterization conceives with the antihero's reflects upon the shift in the audience's fictional preferences. Consequently, the antihero proposes a social and cultural diagnosis on a more profound level while simultaneously uncovering the new discourses that restructure literary and cultural criticism.

2.1. The Demise of the American Hero

Richard Slotkin fragments the origins of the American hero by tracing his birth to the Colonial period. He states: “The colonists... required an image, a symbolic heroic figure, whose character and experiences would express their own sense of history, of their relationship to the American land, of their growing away from Europe” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 189). Indeed, as the colonists were facing new challenges with the Indian wars and the harshness of American wilderness, they progressively outgrew their European origins. A heroic figure was then needed to symbolize their new experiences, to concretize the bond between them and their American land and to finally cut ties with the estranged European ancestors. To that end, the American hero would “bridge the gap between the European past and the Indian present” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 189), and would play the role of mediator in the transition between the two cultures.

James Fenimore Cooper created this tale by inaugurating the tradition of the American Western and “furnishing the main ingredients for the American individualist hero” (Davis 31). First published in 1827 in a set of five novels, *The Leatherstocking Tales* tell the story of the passionate Natty Bumppo who adventures in a life of freedom in the wilderness. The symbolism behind the Cooperian hero is twofold; on the one hand, he embodies the embracement of the wilderness and the progressive attachment to the mother land. On the other hand, he is the “proto-American;” alienated from his European backgrounds to signify the transfer of power and the birth of the new republic (Barker & Sabin 10). Cooper set the pace for many perceptions to come, including the fate of the Native Americans and the Manifest Destiny.¹

¹ The Cooperian hero was a cultural archetype who cultivated several versions of the American hero that were adapted to contextual realities. His prototype was carried at the turn of the 20th century when successful businessmen profiled themselves as industrial heroes, promising by that material comfort and economic stability. This was reflected in Horatio Alger’s novels, including *Fame and Fortune* and *Life Among the New York Newsboys*. Considered one of the most socially influential American writers of his generation, Alger’s writings had an important effect on the United States during the Gilded Age. He produced “young adult” novels about distressed boys and their rise from poor backgrounds to comfortable life through hard work, courage and honesty. Alger’s novels brought a new vision of the American hero who must climb the economic and social ladder with a high moral code. He must work hard to mature a sense of responsibility and confront the enemies who seek to degrade him (Barker & Sabin 10). Case in point, different layers and ideals were added to the image of the American hero, and each image fostered great confidence and strength in the concept of heroism in the American mind.

Though the American hero continues to reflect America's community values constructed centuries ago (House 65), the postmodern world requires a revision of this heroic representation. After the Second World War, America was charged with a negative attitude towards all political, social and cultural constructs. The people's mistrust worsened as America ushered in the stormy sixties. Events such as the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, drug experimentations and the emergence of hippies introduced new morals and values.¹ The forces of opposition of the 1960s collided to create a whole anti-state movement of *counterculture*². Evidently, opposition rose against some of the most important cultural foundations, including the American hero.

American author Garland Tucker laments the condition of the postmodern generation which has "lost the conventional meaning of 'hero'" (Tucker, *The Demise*).³ He asserts that conventional virtues are scrutinized under a process of "de-mythologizing" in which "baseness, insensitivity, incivility, callousness, dishonesty, and self-centeredness" are more worthy of recognition (Tucker, *The Demise*). Sometimes in the 1960s, Americans "stopped celebrating heroism," and focused instead on the "negative narrative" within which the "cult of anti-heroism still reigns" (Tucker, *The Demise*). Thus, the American hero was increasingly replaced by the antihero whose distorted personality voiced people's own psychological, social and cultural distresses.

¹ In his *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), Allan Bloom gives his analysis on the 1960 and the liberation movements that heated the period. The sixties, for Bloom, were times of "dogmatic answers" and "trivial tracts." This void was replaced by pop and rock music which, according to him, carried a false discourse of sexual liberation and political authenticity.

² *Counterculture* stood as a discourse in the 1960s through which the youth resisted different forms of powers and became a way of defying social boundaries, conservative manipulations and international hegemony. It consisted of several co-existing, yet conflicting, cultural practices; Rock music, wild outdoors and communal living, drug experimentation, and activism that included civil rights movements, racial, ethnic and sexual liberations currents, anti-intellectualism and anti-war demonstrations. For further information, students could consult David Burner's *Making Peace with the Sixties* (1996).

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2.2. The Rise of the Antihero

The concept of heroism is witnessing an increased unpopularity, both in the real and the fictional world (Tucker, *The Demise*). This should not be construed as a pessimistic opinion but rather as a factual reality. In many fields of social life, the problems stemming from the complexities of modern institutions could not be solved by the conventional epitome of heroic figures. For instance, policy analyst Richard Wilson discusses this idea in details in regards to the political arena. He suggests a change in the persona of the political leader to better cope with this domain, and implies that the world no longer needs heroes but is in desperate need of more antiheroes (Wilson 97).

As the antihero is rising in popularity, criticism around his characteristics has developed. Wilson defines him as someone who “creates change through transcending traditional heroic virtues, and whose impact is often unnoticed but nevertheless vital” (Wilson 13). The antihero has the courage to outshine traditionally imposed values and pragmatically deal with personal social issues. This ability is usually acquired through several lived experiences that build and arm his persona.¹

The national pessimism of the sixties was crucial to the development of the antihero as a role model, and the anti-heroic mode became “the only viable form of moral and social honesty left available” (Simmons 5). The rebel antihero has gained more popularity over the years in media and popular culture. According to Rebecca Stewart, a lecturer at the School of Humanities and Cultural Studies at Bath Spa University, this explains why “literature containing the antihero seems to blossom in reactionary times, such as films of the 1960s as Vietnam ended and the Cold War began” (Stewart & Peters 7).

¹ In regards to leadership, the antihero possesses the adequate “psychological development” to handle the pressure that comes with such responsibility. His practicality and sense of awareness is much needed in a highly globalized world. The antihero possesses a number of qualities that ensure an effective control in positions of authority. This is due to his ability at “adapting to new circumstances, building diverse relationship and understanding people” (Wilson 15). Thanks to his challenging obstacles in life, he acquires “transformational learning” where he is able to transcend his experiences and use them to enhance his operating systems (Wilson 38). Thus, the antihero is admired in situations of command and power, whereas the hero is slowly casted away as an outdated and inefficient leader.

Stewart believes that the antihero's representation in literature is an old phenomenon that could be found in William Shakespeare's plays (*Othello*, *Hamlet*) or Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels (*Crime and Punishment*). She defines him as someone who has his "own code of conduct, requires no veneration... refuses to bow to the expectations of society and rebels against the rules that bind us all" (Stewart & Peters 7). The relationships he has with people are troublesome and conflicted as he rarely conceals his dark side, and is, thus, often a victim of social rejection (Stewart & Peters 7).

In the world of fiction, anti-heroism is traditionally understood as being the antithesis of heroism which generates a misconception about the character of the antihero as an evil archetype. In his essay "Archetypal Criticism," Northrop Frye develops a concept he calls "foil,"¹ designating a character employed for the purpose of enhancing the qualities of another character (Frye 226). The antihero is usually portrayed as "blunt," immoral and insensitive, and his main function is to highlight the qualities of the hero as his opposite in courage and good will.

New York Times bestselling author Jennifer Crusie attempts to rectify the misrepresentation of the antihero as the villain with no moral grounds. In her *Antiheroes: Heroes/villains and the Fine Line Between*, she considers the antiheroes as the characters who are just "a smidge too good to be labeled a villain even if their actions are sometimes indistinguishable from the bad guys. Antiheroes are compelling because they flirt with that magical, mythically distinct line between good and evil" (Crusie 2). Though that line which separates the "bad guys" from the "good guys" is immensely complex, the antihero manages to ping-pong right in between to reflect the entanglements of human nature.

The attempt to place the antihero on the pedestals of good or evil is even approached by psychologists. Michael Spivey, Professor at the Department of Cognitive Science at the University of California, and librarian Steven Knowlton

¹ For further inquiries on Northrop Frye's classification of archetypal narratives, his essay "Archetypal Criticism" (1957) provides a thorough study on the recurrent narrative designs, patterns of action, character-types, themes and images which are present in a variety of works and formulas of literature. Among his suggested classifications, we mention; the hero, the outcast, the scapegoat, the Femme Fatale, and the shrew.

consider the characterization of the antihero in fiction from a psychological perspective. In their essay “Anti-Heroism in the Continuum of Good and Evil,” they state:

Too good to be a villain, too evil to be a hero, the anti-hero occupies an all too realistic gray area in between those idealized extremes. This *good guy who does bad things for the right reasons* has not always been appropriately appreciated in literature, or in psychology for that matter. (Spivey & Knowlton 52 – Their italics)

Evidently, in Western culture, the “folk psychology” often requires a simplistic “formal logic;” whereby good people are described as heroes and evil people as villains. The antihero, however, represents a compelling psychological case of Yin and Yang¹ which asserts the blurriness of the good/evil line and emphasizes the infinite dichotomies of the human psyche; as the scholars conclude: “[The antihero] shines his flashlight on that line, revealing that it was already blurred when he got there” (Spivey & Knowlton 53).

The traditional formula of killer/victim and good/evil is rather flat when played within the complexities of postmodern narratives; as Spivey and Knowlton restate:

What all anti-heroes have in common is that they capture our imagination by attempting to balance their evil methods with their good intentions. Sometimes the results are purely gratifying; sometimes purely horrifying. More often, the results are a strange but compelling mixture of the two. Indeed, it is those mixed results that endear them to us. We see our flawed selves in anti-heroes, and this allows us to understand their humanity, even when their deeds are unquestionably evil. (Spivey & Knowlton 62)

Though his criminal path is part of an undeniable immorality, the antihero is often humanized through an identification bond. He attracts the attention and sympathy of intrigued audiences as he often reflects their inner psychological turmoil lethally combined with social frustration. According to cultural

¹ The theory of Yin and Yang originates from Chinese philosophy. It stipulates a duality of balance between two opposite but complementary aspects that govern the universe. Yin is characterized as negative, passive and feminine; whereas Yang is positive, active and masculine.

enthusiast and marketer in publishing industry, Jonathan Michael, characters “who shine as morally pure and upright don’t ring true to us anymore... Brokenness is a part of humanity, and we can more easily relate to the choices that a character makes if they are broken too.” (Michael, *The Rise*).¹ The traditional hero can no longer dialogize the frustrations of postmodern reality, nor does he seem realistic enough to convey an honest and passionate storyline. The antihero, however, is “flexible enough” to accommodate the variations of his context, simply by “having the guts and moral ambiguity to commit astounding acts that require anything from intimidation to mass murder as the means to an end” (Spivey & Knowlton 61). Thus, the rise of antihero as the new leading figure of popular fiction is achieved through a representation of a psychological and social reality which voices the audience’s inner distress.

According to cultural studies researcher, Lucas Lowman, the beginning of character complexity in American popular culture could be traced to the late 1800s when pulp magazines surfaced in the market (Lowman, *Morality*)² and depicted a new detective antihero who broke traditional boundaries and mores for the general common good. This character believed in achieving good deeds but not through simplistic and innocent means. Far from the model of perfection the traditional hero presented, this antihero was filled with flaws and vice such as drinking, smoking, violence, monetary gain and thirst for sex.

The antihero would resurface with an important impact in the big screens of film noir in the 1940s and 1950s whose narrative structure is usually based on a “moody, pessimistic style of filming with downbeat plots, unscrupulous protagonists, and dark, atmospheric cinematography that reflected the social malaise and unease of postwar American society” (Dixon & Foster 104). Indeed, the obscure themes film noir projected through its narratives suited the imperfect character of the antihero. The context of these specific types of movies imposed a revision of American traditional concepts, especially heroism. The impact of the

¹ This is an e-text; therefore, page number is not available.

² This is an e-text; therefore, page number is not available.

Second World War and the horrific atrocities witnessed by the people left a print of despair that would change their entertainment tastes and literary expectations. The stressful events that would follow this period would emphasize this melancholy and, eventually, reflect on the characterization of the antihero.

Ultimately, the popularity of the antihero is particularly amplified in the field of popular culture where the demise of the hero and the rise of the antihero, precisely in America, come as an expected reaction. The forces of popular culture align with the general discontent against traditional values and finally prevail as the embodiment of the skepticism postmodernism is known for. This new cultural phenomenon, its structure, evolution, theories and characteristics are discussed in the next sub-section.

3. The New Age of Popular Culture

Popular culture embodies a variety of shared practices and meanings within a group of people. Its growing social, political and economic forces have attracted the attention of academics and cultural theorists. In an attempt to dissect its sprouting discourses, several definitions provided by different schools and critics are explored to finally explain its history and development as an American experience and phenomenon.

3.1. Towards a Definition of Popular Culture

Pioneer historian and cultural critic Raymond Williams defines culture as “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (Williams 87). This word impregnates one of the most complex concepts, difficult to define in several academic disciplines due to its constant “historical development” and the intricate process it goes through. He begins by tracing the origins of the term to its basic utilitarian origin and states: “[culture] took on the main meaning of cultivation or tending...in all its early uses [it] was a noun of process: the tending *of* something, basically crops or animals” (Williams 87 – his italics). Thus, culture started as an actual state of being, attending to nature’s basic needs.

As new economic, political and intellectual movements started to shape social paths around the world, 'culture' developed towards its modern and more complicated senses. Williams outlines three definitions. The first one states that culture is a "general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development" (Williams 90). The cultural development of Western Europe with its aesthetic, spiritual and intellectual factors could be taken as a valid illustration (Storey 2). In this sense, culture is the product of great philosophers, artists and poets who ensure the continuum of human progress.

The second category deals with the "particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group" (Williams 90). Williams sees culture in the day-to-day life experiences, including religion, festivities, rituals, music and literature. This particular definition is what emeritus Professor of cultural studies John Storey calls a "lived culture" (Storey 2). It is constituted by unified collectives and formed through combined productions, artistic and cultural manifestations. This unity created by all members of society allows the emergence of a common "social project" (Baskin 111).

Williams' third category interprets culture as "the independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity. This seems often now the most widespread use: culture is music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film" (Williams 90). Thus, this definition combines artistic productions of meaning, including the fine arts, poetry, novels, and, as we shall see in the proceedings, soap-opera and comics (Storey 3).

The combination of Williams' second and third category would constitute our first definition of popular culture. This "social project" would emanate as a powerful phenomenon in the arena of cultural diversification, producing as such a new discourse of popular culture characterized by unconventional– and often unappreciated – mores, values and expressions. This phenomenon would prove difficult for many academic disciplines to discern or even to define as its dynamic factors are constantly changing.

After attempting to define culture, Williams diverts his attention to the 'popular'. He suggests four different meanings to the word; "well liked by many people," "inferior kinds of work," "work deliberately setting out to win favour with the people" and "culture actually made by the people for themselves" (Williams 111). Accordingly, any definition of popular culture will be the result of the combination of these four elements with the multiple definitions of 'culture' set out by Williams and his counterparts, taken within particular historical, social and economical contexts (Storey 5).

Storey attempts to define popular culture in six different ways. He joins Williams in his first interpretation of the 'popular,' and investigates the "quantitative index" of his claim in the wide appreciation of CDs, DVDs and the sale of comics (Storey 5). A quantitative approach, according to him, is needed to prove the "popular" of popular culture but not necessarily adequate to define it. Evidently, this approach would certainly include "the officially sanctioned high culture" which contradicts the essence of popular culture as being distinct and unique (Storey 6).

Storey's second definition generates an inter-social debate as it states that popular culture is "the culture that is left over after we have decided what is high culture" (Storey 6). This definition classifies popular culture as a "residual category," not eligible enough to meet the requirements of high culture as the criteria of judgment are usually based on aesthetical features. Moreover, it insists on the commercial character of mass production in popular culture; whereas high culture is praised for its emphasis on individual artistic talent. Thus, while the "latter deserves only a moral and aesthetic response; the former requires only a fleeting sociological inspection to unlock what little it has to offer" (Storey 6).

This definition highlights the historical and socio-economic struggle of class distinction as the "level of quality" indicates a profound ideological issue. It first proposes a revision of Mathew Arnold's writings on culture. The English poet and cultural critic believes that culture is the "body of knowledge" and "the best that has been thought and said in the world" (Arnold 11). It is the production of the finest members of society and should only be qualified as such if it serves

the greater humankind. Though popular culture is never defined by Arnold, a conclusion could be deduced from his views on “anarchy” and how he synonymously relates it to a certain category of people. Anarchy, for Arnold, is a crucial nature of working class lived culture. The “raw and uncultivated masses” represent a political and social danger for the more refined high culture. Thus, popular culture is the production of the proletariat and is characterized by anarchism and unawareness (Arnold 40).

Storey’s third definition is admittedly closely related to the previous one as it sees popular culture as a “mass culture.” The standing argument is that it is “hopelessly commercial” in nature, thus, forcibly manipulative. It is purposely targeted towards passive and sterile minds to make people abide by the discourse imposed on them. In this sense, popular culture is devoid from any authenticity as it serves only the purpose of mass consumption. It is produced by the people in power with the use of a specific language to serve a particular agenda of social and intellectual hibernation.

The fourth definition does more justice to the creativity of popular culture; it asserts that it originates from “the people.” Accordingly, it is an authentic production, or as Storey puts it, “a culture of the people for the people” (Storey 9). Though it acknowledges originality and creativity, Storey insists that there is no specific measure to exactly define who these ‘people’ truly are. More importantly, it does not elaborate on the previously mentioned commercial nature of popular culture. He admits that popular culture forcibly includes a commercial/consumption relation which this definition ignores. Thus, popular culture becomes a “highly romanticized” concept created by the working class members in their resistance to capitalism.

Storey’s fifth definition originates in a political and cultural struggle for power between social classes, and is based on the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s concept of “*hegemony*.” The theory of “cultural hegemony” elaborates on the relationship between two “superstructural levels” in society: the “civil

society” and “the State.” In his *Prison Notebooks*,¹ Gramsci believes that these two levels correspond to the function of “*hegemony*,” through which the “dominant groups” seek to control the “subordinate groups” by manipulating the culture – beliefs, perceptions, values and mores (Gramsci 12). The subordinates manifest their discourse of opposition which would eventually constitute a culture of resistance.²

As the fight between high culture and popular culture is fiercely stressed, the latter becomes identified as the voice of the people. John Cawelti, a pioneer in the study of Popular and American Culture, claims that “high art is commonly treated as aesthetic structure or individual vision; the popular arts are studied as social and psychological data” (Cawelti, *Notes toward* 258). Popular culture fulfills the emotional and psychological needs of a particular sub-society (Cawelti, *Popular Culture* 10). Ergo, it is a manifestation of various artistic and cultural experiences. Cawelti explains how popular culture symbolizes an “attitude” of acceptance towards all cultural artifacts which could have been underestimated by other intellectuals and artists (Cawelti, *Popular Culture: The Coming* 166).

Professor Holt Parker from the University of Cincinnati summarizes his “tentative” definition of popular culture as “unauthorized culture.” After extensive revisions of precedent theories and definitions about this phenomenon, and without negating what each definition brought as pragmatic material to define it, he attempts at finding a simplified compromise and states:

¹ In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci develops his concept of “*hegemony*” in relation to the position of the intellectual, his function and role in defining the course of social and cultural upheavals. He differentiates two types of intellectuals; the traditional and the organic intellectual; while the former is modeled by the dogmas of the dominant class, the latter serves his own social class by creating awareness and revolutionizing conventional norms of control. The fight of the intellectual, according to Gramsci, should be against the capitalist state of the ruling class for an egalitarian society.

² In this sense, popular culture becomes a “terrain of struggle” between the subordinate groups and the ruling class. It is a “terrain of exchange and negotiation between the two: a terrain, as already stated, marked by resistance and incorporation” (Storey 10). Thus, popular culture becomes highly involved in political relations and dynamic according to historical and cultural upheavals; i.e., it is in a constant process of production of meaning, conforming to the changes of social relations and practices.

Popular culture is unauthorized culture. That is, popular culture consists of the paintings of those not recognized as artists by the artworld, the poems of those not recognized by whoever is responsible for recognizing poets, the medicine of those not recognized as physicians, the religion of those not recognized as priests, to which we might add the scholarship of those not recognized as scholars by the proper institutions. (Parker 165)

Popular culture combines the unapproved productions of meaning created to upset and disturb the conventionally imposed discourse. It is born out of resistance and opposition, and a sense of rebellion and defiance is part of its constructs.

Postmodernism¹ represents a fair legitimizing outlet as it negates Mathew Arnold's association of popular culture to anarchism and unawareness. It also does not recognize the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture. According to Christian Messenger, Professor at the University of Illinois, postmodernism allows all terminology to "coexist in a more relaxed tension where the inability to sharply distinguish popular from elite, moral from aesthetic might count as a creative first step" (Messenger 44). For some, this represents the end of elitism; for others, it is the victory of commerce over culture (Storey 183). Nevertheless, popular culture under postmodernists such as Jean François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Michel Foucault is studied – as we will see shortly – not as a residual culture, but as an entity of exchange of signifier and signified, markets and marketing, discourse and power, or of arbitrary hyperrealism.

This thesis is placed within the core of postmodernism and relies on its proposed definition of popular culture. With a fierce sense of pride, popular culture has entered the academic field, leaving theorists perplex in the face of its growing powers. Though interpreted differently by several schools of thought, it remains a constant experience, voicing people's artistic creations, cultural discourses and historical development. It has precisely nested within the American social fabric to reside as a unique phenomenon peculiar to the American mind.

¹ An elaboration on *postmodernism* is part of the next section.

3.2. Popular Culture as an American Phenomenon

Popular culture matured into a phenomenon of great magnitude in America. According to Storey, this is due to the “Americanization” of European societies. He states:

What is true is that in the 1950s (one of the key periods of Americanization), for many young people in Britain, American culture represented a force of liberation against the grey certainties of British everyday life. What is also clear is that the fear of Americanization is closely related to a distrust (regardless of national origin) of emerging forms of popular culture. (Storey 13)

Thus, popular culture represents a threat of not only ‘Americanizing’ traditional values and mores, but also of liberating people from centuries of imposed forms of culture. More importantly, it represents a deeper threat of political, economic and social unrest from the ‘masses.’

Cawelti traces the origins of American popular culture throughout the cultural upheavals of American history. He claims that the first phase appeared in the 19th century as a means of assimilation of Anglo-Americans. Groups from German, Scandinavian, Dutch, Jewish and other ancestries found comfort in their common complexions and wished to assert their “white Americanism” in the face of immigration waves (Cawelti, *Popular Culture* 7). Assimilation through theaters, amusement parks and other forms of entertainment gave birth to Anglo-American popular culture and preserved the WASP preeminence by imposing a cultural hegemony (Cawelti, *Popular Culture* 7). By the mid-nineteenth century, however, a clear line between popular culture and what came to be known as canonic or high culture began to form. This second phase of popular culture is resumed in what Cawelti calls “the long-lasting battle of the brows” (Cawelti, *Popular Culture: The Coming* 165).

This phase was affected by the industrialization of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, the new “industrial elite” wished to revive their European roots and traditions; as a result, they adopted a ‘highly’ estimated social conduct and artistic endeavors. This came to be known as highbrow or canonical culture (Cawelti, *Popular Culture* 8). On the other hand, the growth of mass media and

migration waves encouraged the development of a common or ‘lowbrow’ culture. The gap between these two new attitudes became clearly noticeable with the surge of modernism in the early twentieth century; nonetheless, popular culture was increasingly and constantly redefining American cultural grounds. The interwar years witnessed a revolt of the youth against traditional concepts and new experimentations with different mores and values immersed this new generation in popular culture.¹

Slotkin analyzes the importance and influence of popular culture in the formation of the different elements that constitute the American cultural system. He travels through centuries of American history and leads anthropological, socio-economic and cultural approaches to have a better understanding on the constructs of mythologies and their discourses in American culture. In his attempt to study myths under the influence of popular culture, he states:

The mythology produced by [popular culture] has a particular role and function in a cultural system that remains complex and heterodox. It is the form of cultural production that addresses most directly the concerns of Americans as citizens of a nation-state. (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 9)

Slotkin’s claim clarifies two important points; first, popular culture has been more concerned with people’s issues as citizens by producing networks of political ideologies throughout the development of American history. More importantly, popular culture, though accused for its commercialized nature, is responsible for the creation of deep myths that build and develop the “cultural system” of a particular civilization. To minimize the power of popular culture or reduce it to residual and commercialized materials is to deprive the academic world from a major force of cultural criticism. Though its artistic forms are underestimated, the multitude of products it offers, from movies, magazines, comic books to – as we shall see – popular literature provide a wide terrain of social and cultural analysis.

¹ The media outlets created a wide platform for different minorities and ethnic groups to distinguish a more complex presence in American culture. As the social transformation matured in the sixties and early seventies, it became clear that popular culture was more adequate to the cultural diversity in American society (Cawelti, *Popular Culture* 10). These changes imposed a new definition of a ‘pure’ American popular culture different from the Anglo-American hegemony which characterized the first phase.

4. Popular Literature: An Underestimated Art

A common misconception circulates within the field of literary studies which has stood the test of time; popular literature is a subordinate form of art, “having nothing to do with discourses of creativity and originality” (Gelder 15). Its reputation has been the center of heated debates to evaluate its content and position in cultural and literary studies. More often than not, it is directly rejected as an industrial practice, operating within the mechanisms of “culture industry.”¹ While Slotkin legitimizes the commercial exercise of popular literature, his views are not shared with his counterparts, and opinions over its worth and practice have created frictions in the academic world.

4.1. The Struggle for Recognition

Popular literature has always struggled to be recognized as a valuable expression worthy of academic attention and criticism. The constant comparison with canonical literary texts stigmatized it with cultural inferiority. Cawelti traces this differentiation to Socrates and Plato in the Classical period. According to Socrates, a fundamental distinction exists between arts which are based on rationality and knowledge, and “non-arts” which are produced for the purpose of entertainment (Cawelti, *Notes toward* 256). His descendent, Plato, confirms that “non-arts” are irrational and not concerned with truth and deep meaning. This Platonic distinction remains relevant to some modern critics under different connotations. Although many intellectuals such as T.S. Eliot and Edmund Wilson seem captivated by popular literature and popular culture in general, it is still considered a threat to traditional artistic values and an “immature” substitution of high art.

¹ In a chapter entitled “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” of the book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer coined the term “culture industry” to denote the manufacturing of TV and radio programs, movies and magazines to manipulate the masses and enforce upon them a discourse of authority. Popular culture becomes a vehicle of capitalism which enforces mass consumption, mainly at the level of the working class.

Ken Gelder, Professor at De Montfort University in England, proposes a set of arguments to justify the undermining of popular literature. To site a few, he first asserts that popular fiction is “best conceived as the opposite of Literature”¹ (Gelder 11). This differentiation is the result of dissimilar “logics and practices” which results in divergent readings and interpretations (Gelder 12). Gelder’s strongest argument, however, is the factor of language used to express the materials of popular literature. He stresses that Literature inspires from the “language of the art,” amplifying the genius and the creativity of its author, while popular culture does not apply “autonomous language,” occupying another position in the literary field (Gelder 12). His stand could be resumed in one statement: popular fiction is a subordinate form of writing, not complex or sophisticated enough to be considered as a worthy expression of art.

As an opposing view, Dirk Vanderbeke, a Professor of English Studies at the Friedrich Schiller University Jena, attempts to defend popular literature by evaluating its gifts to humanity. In his *Evolution and Popular Narrative*², he considers it as an “incisive index into human nature” (Vanderbeke 9). He admits to the aesthetic limits as well as the repetitive plot patterns and stereotypical figures; nonetheless, this disadvantage should not underestimate its profound portrayal of human depth; he states:

Popular narrative is quite obviously a relevant phenomenon; to dismiss it from serious inquiry would limit the validity of theoretical claims regarding aesthetic experience, reader response, artistic techniques, narrative strategies, and various other concerns that otherwise are based on a small percentage of the texts produced – and, consequently, of their actual readers. Popular culture should be credited as the vastly more representative choice, even if often in the face of negative critical evaluation. (Vanderbeke 11)

¹ Gelder capitalizes the letter L to speak about literature belonging to high culture as opposed to popular culture and popular fiction. This capitalization seems purposeful to evoke the majestic power and universal impact of literary canons. Among the proposed authors he mentions: D.H. Lawrence, Flannery O’Connor, Vladimir Nabokov, Martin Amis, Toni Morrison, Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, Jonathan Franzen, Arundhati Roy, Don DeLillo and Tobias Wolff.

² Dirk Vanderbeke presents a compelling case in defense of popular literature. He proposes several arguments to restore the validity, importance and worth of its narratives. Their popularity is an indication of a powerful ability to reach and represent human instincts and desires. Their variety of genres and strategies, as well as modes and motifs, allow the formation of “universal patterns” of human nature which provide literary criticism an abundance of “explanatory models.”

Contrary to Gelder, Vanderbeke restores the worth of popular literature by exposing the variety of fields and concerns it often tackles. Moreover, he suggests a critical tool that would look beyond the commercial nature of popular narratives by focusing on the ones that have “outlived their popularity and commercial usefulness” to stand as masterpieces, still able to communicate timeless struggles about “love,” “conflict,” “mating and survival” (Vanderbeke 25).

In regards to the battle of popular literature to gain the aesthetic appeal, Messenger believes it to be deeper and more complex in meaning. Popular literature has a peculiar way of “speaking of everything that is important in ways that prematurely recontain the subjects in some way or another” (Messenger 03). It is able to communicate several dimensions of cultural and social discourses in simplified dialogs. Elite and popular fictions both serve different purposes as cultural products. According to Messenger, “elite fiction raises a trope to a metaphor. Popular fiction reduces a trope to its semantic outlines and then trades on the aura of its richness, its authentic life” (Messenger 214). Indeed, popular fiction breaks the metaphorical dimension of literature and simplifies its semantics in order to expose its richness and authenticity.

Messenger claims that the level of difficulty is usually determined by the writer’s “strengths and weaknesses” and, more importantly, by the cultural reception and encouragement. The criteria of judging the complexity or simplicity of an artistic work depends on the critic, in a process Messenger calls “metacriticism.” The critic has the main role in exteriorizing the ‘hidden’ authenticity of a popular fiction work. For him to earn that role, he must “bring emotion, reason, and training but also admit his insecurities about illicit reading pleasures as well as his yearnings for wholeness, justice, and closure” (Messenger 5). Thus, popular literature becomes a three dimensional work of art; composed of the writer’s abilities, social reception and the critic’s open-mindedness.

4.2. *The Godfather* and *Fight Club*: The Triumph of Popular Literature

This research considers two popular culture narratives; *The Godfather* and *Fight Club*. *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo has been implemented as one of the most influential classics in American popular culture. Published in 1969, the novel scored a staggering triumph, selling over 21 million copies and becoming one of the bestselling books in American history. Puzo's genius appears not only in the way he romanticized a mob family, resulting in an endless fascination and admiration for the Corleone family, but also in the manner he intertwined the Italian American experience with the American consciousness of the time. More importantly, Puzo was able to create a national phenomenon in the field of popular culture. He innovatively elevated concepts such as mob culture, criminality, ethnicity and the American Dream, and shed upon them a new light in the academic field. This literary success was mirrored in its cinematography adaptation; Francis Ford Coppola's trilogy; *The Godfather I* (1972), *The Godfather II* (1974) and *The Godfather III* (1990) are still enlisted among the first best movies in the history of American cinematography.

Puzo's *The Godfather* proves that a popular literature work could still be impregnated with a multitude of concepts and discourses to investigate. Puzo admits having conflicting feelings about his oeuvre: "I wished like hell I'd written it better. I like the book. It has energy and I lucked out by creating a central character that was popularly accepted as genuinely mythic. But I wrote below my gifts in that novel" (Puzo, *The Making* 14). Puzo worries about style complexity in his novel; however, his work mythically encodes "Freudian, epic, ethnic, capitalist, self-made, and male literary images of enduring power" in American culture (Messenger 57), proving that the power of a literary work resides in its meaning, rather than in the complexity of its syntax. To that end, Messenger confirms that "It's not a problem of worrying about Puzo and his novel not being complex enough; it's making the acknowledgment that *writing about popular authors and their fictions is complex*" (Messenger 5 – His italics). Indeed, critical analysis of popular literature is a highly complex and demanding

procedure. This proves, once again, that popular culture literary works could still outlive the stereotypical stigma attached to their aesthetics.

Chuck Palahniuk, for his part, shaped the context of the millennium popular culture by crafting one of the most influential narratives in the twenty-first century. *Fight Club*, published in 1996, provides a closure for the twentieth century and paints an opening scene for the twenty-first century. Its unconventional content divided academic critics in several fields. Palahniuk uncovers the disenchantment of the postmodern culture and exposes the American society as an emasculated, shallow and consumerist beast. The most controversial element in Palahniuk's oeuvre is his call for a restoration of the primal and aggressive state of human beings, knowing that the concepts of chaos and violence to reset human lives are inconceivable in the highly civilized world of the new century. Like *The Godfather*, *Fight Club* entered the cinematographic world in 1999 with the direction of David Fincher. The movie, though poorly received in the box office, spoke directly to the people and created a worldwide fan base.

Chuck Palahniuk's popular novel achieved a highly acclaimed success while fiercely criticizing the trivialities of the postmodern world. As discussed before, the third definition of popular culture depicts it as a commercial art criticized for its ideological manipulation and its materialistic motives. Evidently, commerce is an undeniable part of the constructs, production and distribution of popular culture. In the case of *Fight Club*, Palahniuk seems more interested in attacking society for its consumerist obsessions than in exposing the exploitative domination of neoliberal capitalism (Giroux 5).

Admittedly, the novel and its cinematographic adaptation are part of the same consumerist culture it attacks. According to Giroux, the wide popularity of *Fight Club* makes it work "against itself" (Giroux 7). Arguably, Slotkin attempts to present a compromise between the consumerist nature of popular culture and its value as an art:

I think it is useful to speak not only of ‘mass culture’ but of the development of an ‘industrial popular culture,’ whose artifacts are produced primarily by a commercial culture industry but whose symbols become active constituents of a *popular culture* - that is, the belief and value structures of a national audience or public. (Slotkin, *Gunfighter 9* – His italics)

Slotkin admits to the commercial aspect of popular culture. This side should not be denied but rather studied for its structure of an “industrial popular culture.” This should not undermine its value as a representative artifact of a “national audience” or a national culture. In the case of the American audience, popular culture, through its literary artifacts, like *Fight Club*, has provided the American cultural system with many symbols. More importantly, it has opened the doors to many variations of literary criticism that are closer to the common people including studies of their relations with capitalism, their use of violence and their psychological structures.

Beside the stigma attached to its aesthetics, popular literature was not accepted in the academic field for its lack of theoretical frameworks and methods of analysis. Its high embrace of different genres and modes of practice has opened the doors to many artistic works; however, it has also entailed a lack of a definite set of theories that critically assess the content of the materials and evaluate their social and cultural relations. Popular literature nested under the constructs of multiculturalism to critically assess its narratives, but the latter matured with time into an independent discipline¹ (Cawelti, *Popular Culture* 4). To that end, critics have been attempting to formulate a theoretical body that could match the academic establishment of multicultural studies. John Cawelti successfully established his theory of formula that builds a structure of literary

¹ The term multiculturalism is often used to denote a variety of concepts and meanings within many contexts. It is attached to ethnic pluralism and cultural pluralism in which ethnic groups collaborate with each other to celebrate their differences and educate about uniqueness and toleration. Multiculturalism includes studies in race, ethnicity and gender relations, creating distinctive journals, courses and associations. The divergences between multiculturalism and popular culture are, according to Cawelti, sourced in three different reasons. First, scholars of multicultural approaches wished to emphasize the materials associated with their specific hyphenated culture. Second, they wanted to emphasize the canons related to their ethnic and cultural origins. Finally, they wanted to focus on recording their historical experiences through well-established theories and methodologies to frame their artistic productions (Cawelti, *Popular Culture* 4).

criticism to the materials of popular culture. An elaboration of this theory – as well as other theories – is part of the following theoretical section.

II. Popular Culture through Theoretical Lenses

This second section deals with the key theories that provide structure to this research. It is divided into three sub-sections, each one representing a particular theoretical framework. First, John Cawelti's theory of formula and his insights on popular culture are used to investigate the evolution of cultural patterns in popular literature. The following stage provides an explanation of Jean François Lyotard's theory of "metanarratives" and how it could be applied to the Manifest Destiny. Finally, Richard Slotkin's theory of *Regeneration through Violence*, in addition to his knowledge on myth and its role in creating the American national character, places this thesis within the bowls of American studies. Thus far, it suffices to moderately brush upon these theories as their profound elements and structures are elaborated in more detail in the analytical chapters.

1. Formula: An Academic Approach to Popular Culture

John Cawelti, the honoree of the Popular Culture Association,¹ is one of the pioneers who constructed a respectable academic core to the study of popular fiction. He explains in his "The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Culture" that critics and students of popular culture have long attempted to define the field and its theoretical structure. Since the forces of postmodernism were reshuffling cultural definitions and negating the distinction between high and mass culture, the establishment of a theoretical body to popular culture began to form (Cawelti, *The Concept* 116).

Formula is a revolutionary theoretical framework, dedicated specifically to popular culture studies and fashioned upon the study of "collective literary patterns" (Cawelti, *MYTH* 8). Before defining the course of this theory, Cawelti creates a basic outlet for building his framework. First, he clarifies the nature of all cultural products and divides them according to two main components. He

¹ The Popular Culture Association was created by Professors Ray Browne and Russell Nye at Michigan State University in 1971. It came as a reaction to the American Studies Association which became too committed to the canon of literature without any consideration to popular literary works. The organization specializes in the study of material culture, popular music, movies and comics.

explains that all cultural products are a combination of conventions and inventions (Cawelti, *The Concept* 118). On the one hand, conventions are the familiar elements known to both the artist and his audience. They are mainly composed of favorite narratives, typical stereotypes, repeated story patterns, ordinary characters and commonly known perceptions. Inventions, on the other hand, are the genuine characteristics that reflect the newness and uniqueness of the artist's creation (Cawelti, *The Concept* 118). Moreover, the function of conventions is to assure an "ongoing continuity" and preserve cultural stability, while inventions confront the audience with unconventional concepts and are more responsive to the constant changes of reality (Cawelti, *The Concept* 118).

The successful combination of conventions and inventions is, according to Cawelti, what constitutes the first definition of formula. Formula is "a conventional system for structuring cultural products" (Cawelti, *The Concept* 119). When an artist succeeds in structuring his oeuvre according to conventions his audience could identify with and inventions that create new perceptions, his work would complement the concept of a formula. Cawelti explains that "[Formula] is the way in which particular cultural imagery and symbolism are fitted into conventional story patterns" (Cawelti, *MYTH* 5). He further exemplifies his definition with T. S Eliot's famous poem *The Waste Land* which is inspired from mythical and historical conventions; nonetheless, its structure and content introduce the reader to newness never experienced before (Cawelti, *The Concept* 119).

Cawelti confirms that "Formula ... is a cultural pattern; it represents the way in which culture has embodied both mythical archetypes and its own preoccupations in narrative form" (Cawelti, *The Concept* 120). Thus, formula is not limited to mythical figures as universal narratives; rather, it includes a careful analysis of the up to date inventions and contradictory elements that constitute such narratives. Finally, this theory relates the communication tool to the manner the audience comprehends the content of the literary work.

Formula considers the popular narrative as a constellation of cultural patterns and analyzes the recurrences of symbols and cultural images; as Cawelti states:

The explanation of the way in which cultural imagery and archetypal story patterns are fitted together can lead to a partial interpretation of the cultural significance of these formulas. This process of interpretation reveals both certain basic concerns that dominate a particular culture and also something about the way in which that culture is predisposed to order or deal with those concerns. (Cawelti, *MYTH 7*)

The reoccurrence of cultural imagery in different popular narratives leads to the formation of literary patterns, and the study of these designs allows the interpretation of their cultural significance and importance. It also reveals the predispositions of certain concepts that exercise a well-defined discourse within the social fabric.

The theory of formula entails an approach of comparison between several literary patterns from different contexts. More importantly, the purpose of such comparison is to analyze the evolution of these formulated archetypes:

The way in which different cultures or periods make use of the same basic formula can be compared ... Significant changes in the valuations or relations ascribed to elements in the formula probably indicate significant differences in attitudes and values ... If a symbol or theme appears in a number of the formulas used in a particular culture or period, this should indicate some interest, concern or attitude of unusual importance. (Cawelti, *MYTH 8*)

Thus, formula allows a careful depiction of the discourses related to different contexts, which provides an opportunity to analyze people's reflections in particular periods. The comparative approach of formula reveals the popularity and interest concerns about certain symbols and cultural images; Cawelti confirms: "we can determine what the most popular formulas are for a particular group, and thereby generate hypotheses about the range and variety of a group's imaginative concerns" (Cawelti, *MYTH 8*). He exemplifies his claim by citing the symbolism of crime in gangster stories which keeps resurfacing in different

forms, creating a formula or a literary pattern within the field of American popular culture (Cawelti, *MYTH* 8).

John Cawelti's theory of formula is part of the contextual approach in dealing with *The Godfather* and *Fight Club*. Its methods will be applied on both novels in each final section of the analytical chapters to lead the comparative aim of the thesis. The purpose of using this particular process of comparison is to trace the progress of the antihero in "delegitimizing" the Manifest Destiny from the onset of early postmodernism in the first narrative to a more advanced state of postmodernity in the second one. The fact that Cawelti's insights deal mainly with popular culture consolidates the purpose of analyzing this emerging phenomenon and its prospects of dismantling the American discourse of perfectibility.

The use of formula will allow a careful study on the conventions used by Mario Puzo to insert his work within the bowels of American culture – attempting to subtly expose its criminal discourse, – and on the inventions depicted by Chuck Palahniuk to denounce and destroy the triviality of the new century. Moreover, formula will reveal the changes that transpired within several patterns, including that of the Manifest Destiny, capitalism, divine election, violence and the antihero. Finally, by adding the audience as a third dimensional factor alongside the author and his work, formula will appreciate the social and cultural progressions of the American mind. Since *The Godfather* and *Fight Club* are postmodern fictional narratives, acting upon the strings of new cultural forces, the analytical procedure will rely on a variety of postmodernists' theories and criticism to frame this research.

2. Postmodernism: The Revolt against Metanarratives

French philosopher and sociologist Jean-François Lyotard first coined the term *postmodernism* in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. He describes the movement as a "condition of knowledge" that portrays the state of culture following the changes that occurred in science, literature and art since the end of the nineteenth century (Lyotard 24). Madan Sarup, a lecturer at Goldsmith's College in London, defines it as a "useful term designating a

profound mutation in recent thought and experience” (Sarup 6). After the Second World War, new features in science, history, economy and arts were shaping a uniquely different social order. The new productions of meanings were characterized by a general sentiment of revolt and opposition against conventional rationality provided by past movements, such as the Enlightenment as well as skepticism towards the ideological narratives presented by Modernism.

2.1. The Mutation of Past Movements

Storey describes postmodernism as a new “sensibility in revolt” against the canonization of culture by modernist avant-gardists. This movement attacks modernism’s sense of elitism and “its canonization in the museum and the academy, as the high culture of the modern capitalist world. It laments the passing of the scandalous and bohemian power of modernism, its ability to shock and disgust the middle class” (Storey 182). Additionally, Daniel Bell, a sociologist and Harvard University Professor, believes that modernism “infected” the values of life, damaged personal motives and created a state of “hyperstimulated sensitivity” due to the dominant focus of authentic self-experience (Bell 72).

Postmodernism questions the aim, intentions and success of Enlightenment and Western Marxism.¹ First, postmodernists claim that Marxism is “outmoded;” its theoretical structures could no longer be applied in Western civilizations, asserting that societies are now “post-Marxist” (Sarup 143). The same critique is applied on the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century². Postmodernists point to the institutionalization of science, art and morality which eventually became separate entities drifting from the “life-world” (Sarup 143). The mutation of past movements extends further than Modernism, Enlightenment and Marxism;

¹ Western Marxism is part of Marxist theory developing in Western and central Europe. Its most celebrated founder is Antonio Gramsci who stressed the fight against capitalism. In his *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas* (1982), Martin Jay explains the topography of Western Marxism and defines its unique characteristics. According to him, the most defining characteristic of Western Marxism is its demand for a “revolution against Capital,” generating mistrust in economic laws that would gradually eradicate capitalism and assure the victory of the proletariat. This calls for radical change to free mankind from an oppressing mechanism.

² According to Sarup, the Enlightenment had a modernity project which consisted of “developing objective science, universal morality and law and autonomous art” (Sarup 144). The final aim was for sciences and arts to control natural forces, promote a better understanding of the self and of the world, justice and progress for all humanity and a general state of happiness.

forcing postmodernists to create new manifestations that correspond to the current order of shifting meanings.

This mutation should not be construed, however, as the negation of the past itself as a historical referential and a pillar in personal and cultural identification. The scrutiny against the tenets of the Enlightenment and Modernism is precisely targeted towards their inability to provide a tangible meaning to the fast growing postmodern condition. As we shall see, this disconnectedness from a significant past resulted in an amplification of falsified historical and cultural metanarratives. Eventually, this caused an estrangement from reality which dramatically affected the center of meanings on the personal and cultural scale.

2.2. The Postmodern Condition: The Misuse of Metanarratives

As a cultural movement, postmodernism attempts to analyze the “postmodern condition” – a term assigned by Lyotard – and diagnose the drastic changes that occurred in social, economic and political structures. To begin with, French philosopher Michel Foucault directs his diagnosis towards organized institutions, such as prisons,¹ mental health clinics or institutionalized intellectuals.² His fight against forms of authority characterizes his diagnosis of the postmodern condition, especially – though not exclusively – in regards to politics and society. Foucault defines postmodernism through two concepts: discourse and power. According to him, discourse is a dynamic force that provides complex systems of meaning and plays a decisive role in the inner

¹ In his *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Foucault analyzes the Western penal system and its development through history. He explains how punishment for wrongful doings shifted from corporal punishment (lynching, torture, execution) to an enclosed form of imprisonment. Though this change preserves a minimal consideration of basic human rights for the criminal, Foucault believes that it was not achieved for his benefits, but to increase social control. In order to keep the people from causing violent riots, often in defense of the accused, the latter had to be kept out of sight, preventing, thus, future crimes. Physical chastisement was then replaced with psychological punishment.

² According to Foucault, the intellectual has shifted from the idealistic function assigned to the traditional intellectual as he is now deeply involved in political institutions as the brain trust of their structure. He serves and implements their discourse in different fields and becomes what Foucault calls a “*specific intellectual*.” He works for different branches and institutions of government according to his own field of expertise; including economy, finance and education. For further information on Foucault and the power of the intellectual, students could consult Michel Foucault’s *Intellectuals and Power: In Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (1977).

relationship between knowledge and power. Thus, discourse allows the circulation of knowledge which reinforces the imposition of power.¹

With the same sentiment of contempt, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard emphasizes the power of the controlling institutions that obstruct all forms of resistance or escape. Baudrillard sees the postmodern condition as a lost cause of doomed reality where the human being is submerged by a supreme hegemonic power and an overwhelming sense of hyperreality. With regretful nostalgia, he blames the fatality of the postmodern condition for its loss of connection with the past and the disintegration of myth. The missing logic of referential has caused a “great trauma” to the postmodern man (Felluga 300).

Baudrillard’s main focus in diagnosing the postmodern condition is the loss of distinction between reality and its cloned models. In his essay “The Precession of Simulacra,” he states: “The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory” (Baudrillard, *The Precession* 1). Baudrillard laments the condition where the model of reality precedes reality itself and acquires a more effective position in people’s lives.²

On the same note of skepticism, American literary critic and philosopher Frederick Jameson believes that the concept of postmodernism is not favored or understood by everyone due to the “unfamiliarity” of the topics it covers. In his essay *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, he claims that the movement’s

¹ Foucault refuses the notion that power belongs to the state or resides in a class struggle; power is discursive in nature. It is not maintained by authoritative structures and violent tyranny from above; rather, it is the way in which knowledge circulates through well established discourses. It operates through different institutions such as the media, political and economic ideologies, hospitals, churches, schools and universities. Since knowledge is transmitted in a form of social language, power could “apply itself to immediate everyday life,” imposing by that “a law of truth” (Foucault, *Power* 4). Thus, it engenders social and cultural practices and meanings, and consequently, shapes human conduct. A collective spirit of resistance is eventually fostered towards the subversive authority; however, it is ultimately contained within the “pre-scripted” order of that same power.

² The main elements responsible for the inability of distinction between reality and its model are, according to Baudrillard, sourced in a variety of alterations in social, economic and cultural values. For instance, media culture, with the birth of the Internet, plays a major role in this detachment from reality; its infiltration within the most private forms of existence allows it to define and determine every minimal detail from commercial purchasing to self-worth perceptions. Moreover, the development of multinational capitalism is increasingly defining urban reality, putting the “industrial process” at the centre of a new form of self-identification. Thus, the simulacrum of reality through its duplicate models affects, at the personal and general scale, the disintegration of the postmodern condition.

birth is characterized by a reaction against the “established forms of high modernism, against this or that dominant high modernism which conquered the university, the museum, the art gallery network, and the foundations” (Jameson 1). Thus, the dominant narrative of Modernism does not communicate the essence of postmodernity. Like Baudrillard, Jameson paints a bleak picture on the postmodern condition, blaming its deterioration on the loss of connection to history which ultimately announces a void of meaning in the present.

To encapsulate Foucault, Baudrillard and Jameson’s insights, Lyotard analyzes the flaws of previous movements and diagnoses the postmodern condition as a misuse of “metanarrative.” He states:

I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functions, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements— narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. (Lyotard 24)

The “metanarrative” for Lyotard is the excess of narratives about a cultural or historical narrative, i.e. “a narrative about narratives” which creates a justifiable bypass for society. Metanarratives distort the original narrative and make it lose its purpose, its leading figure and its journey. Lyotard’s suspicions are directed towards sciences, national myths and universal philosophies such as Marxism or Liberalism. He proposes a more “modest” narrative that focuses on singular events in the aim of dismantling grand ones which would eventually constitute an essential characteristic of postmodernism.

Lyotard asserts that the functioning and endurance of metanarratives relies on the “criterion of legitimacy.” The process of “legitimation” extends from political to philosophical reflections to cover the “historico-political” in which the postmodern condition is thriving. Lyotard centers his diagnosis on a “crisis of legitimacy (“delegitimation”)” which still impacts our current world events

(Bernard 88). Ultimately, this “legitimation” is used as a “game” to impose a fabricated truth as an efficient “performativity” of the system.

Lyotard begins his examinations with the scientific field and its ability to create what he calls the “aporia of authorization.” As the postmodern condition maintains its distrust towards metanarratives, the implications of “legitimation” are considered within the “ethico-political” sphere. In regards to the scientific discourse, Lyotard claims that:

the right to decide what is true is not independent of the right to decide what is just, even if the statements consigned to these two authorities differ in nature. The point is that there is a strict interlinkage between the kind of language called science and the kind called ethics and politics: they both stem from the same perspective, the same “choice” if you will—the choice called the Occident. (Lyotard 35)

According to him, the Occident implemented and imposed a scientific narrative through which it controlled the “social bond.” This discourse is often legitimized by the practice of “language games” that tampers with the “truth.” Legitimation is the process through which the “legislator” manipulates the scientific discourse and is, therefore, authorized to declare, or “promulgate,” what is, indeed, scientific or not. This operation is mirrored in, as Lyotard exemplifies, civil law and cultural myths.

The “scientific knowledge,” according to Lyotard, is not a “totality” but exists in relation to the larger domain of “narrative knowledge”¹ which is more related to “ideas of internal equilibrium and conviviality” (Lyotard 34). The function of “narrative knowledge” is to pragmatically provide an “immediate legitimation.” Lyotard explains how a selection of these narratives (metanarratives) define “what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do” (Lyotard 50). Moreover, the narrator of these narratives “must be” a “metasubject” in the process of

¹ Lyotard clarifies the meaning of “knowledge” as used throughout his inquiry. His definition surpasses the denotative statement to include notions of “knowhow, knowing how to live, how to listen,” translated from French as “*savoir-faire, savoir-vivre, savoir-écouter*.” Knowledge, thus, exceeds the simplistic “application” of “the criterion of truth” and extends to the application of efficiency (technical qualification), as well as ethical wisdom and personal sensibility such as justice, happiness and beauty.

formulating the legitimacy of the “direct institutions of popular cultures” (Lyotard 61). By popularizing legitimacy as “common grounding,” this “metasubject” realizes its “implicit goal.” Thus, metanarratives, though transmitted by a “metaphysical” subject of knowledge, are highly pragmatic in designing the “social bond” and finalizing the process of “legitimation” as the main theme of the postmodern condition.

Willie Thompson, Professor at Johns Hopkins University, believes that history is “what metanarrative or “master narrative” is about. Concepts of “progress” and “decline” of civilizations could be analyzed under the compilation of their metanarratives. More importantly, it is through these metanarratives that history is transmitted and knitted in popular imagination, rendering them a “divine force of immense power stretching over many centuries (Thompson 107). According to him, these metanarratives are generated by “educated elements,” destined specifically to settle the “grievances” of the populace and explain “unsatisfactory conditions of affairs” (Thompson 108). Thus, the function of national metanarratives targets the popular imagination in order to justify certain practices and normalize unsatisfying perceptions (Thompson 108).

The United States follows a similar process in building its own national metanarratives. Among Thompson’s given examples is the Manifest Destiny which entails a rightful exploitation of the continent. In the aftermath of complete land acquisition, the “early twentieth century manifest destiny was supplemented by the concept of ‘the American century’, when it became evident that the USA was manifestly destined to dominate the globe, as indeed it manifestly continues to do” (Thompson 109). Thus, Thompson confirms that the Manifest Destiny develops into a master narrative of global hegemony to enable the United States to extend its ideological weapons and control the world.

This thesis considers the Manifest Destiny, not as a chronologically restricted doctrine of westward expansion, but as a legitimizing metanarrative, placed as a “key form of narrative knowledge.” According to Lyotard, a collectivity that places narratives at the centre of its progress has “no need to

remember its past” (Lyotard 49). The focus is, thus, turned towards the “raw material for its social bond,” not only in the “meaning” of the narratives it transmits, but also the act of perpetuating them through generations (Lyotard 49). Hence, the Manifest Destiny is transmitted through amplified narratives that unify the “social bond” and survive generational advancement. This metanarrative may seem to “belong to the past;”¹ however, it is always “contemporaneous” through acts of recitation that marshal the present into reoccurring situations.

In the same process “scientific knowledge” produces metanarratives of “legitimation” to mend “useful irregularities,” “narrative knowledge” generates cultural metanarratives that manufacture popular discourses to legitimize authority and progress. In the case of the United States, most cultural metanarratives are used to secure capitalist endeavors and legitimize the resulting violence. The master narrative of the Manifest Destiny begins with a continental context of expansion grows into a worldwide vision of globalization. While the discourse of “legitimation” varies under the emblem of virtuous missions, divine election and regenerative frontier experiences, the target remains the same: to increase the nation’s hegemony under legitimate justifications.

“Knowledge narrative” is recited and perpetuated in popular culture to eventually provide unity of the “social bond” through a legitimizing discourse. *The Godfather* relates to the Manifest Destiny through the illicit business of the Corleone Empire. The Corleone destiny duplicates the American destiny, and consequently, exposes its capitalist mission, demystifies its divine path and denounces its violent experiences. *Fight Club*, for its part, attempts to demolish the metanarrative of the Manifest Destiny to create a new one. This deconstruction is part of a millennial culture which mistrusts metanarratives and faithfully aims to reconstruct the social order.

¹ A reminder is set to contradict Richard Hughes’ considerations of the Manifest Destiny as a temporary doctrine which primarily served the westward expansion movements.

In order to follow the process of denuding the Manifest Destiny from its metanarratives, this research relies on postmodern perspectives. In the three successive chapters, it will be argued that both Michael Corleone and Tyler Durden struggle to expose the “legitimation” of capitalism and violence under the narratives of virtuous, divine and redeeming destiny. Under the theoretical lens of Jean-François Lyotard, the comparison between the two narratives will not only relate the antiheroic “delegitimation” efforts to a social reality of skepticism towards metanarratives, but will also depict the progress of these attempts from one context to another.

In the second chapter, the imposition of metanarratives relates capitalism to the Manifest Destiny. It exposes the “legitimation” efforts that infiltrate *The Godfather* as an intricate design of family business to finally alter the motive of the antihero as a rebirth of subjectivity in *Fight Club*. The virtuous narrative of the Manifest Destiny is disclosed as a competitive, murderous and vicious interplay of capitalist interests. Distinct from the traditional Marxist approach that usually deals with capitalism; this thesis will adopt a poststructuralist perspective of “legitimation” as part of its research methodology.

In order to reach the targeted conclusions, the second chapter will elaborate on the state of late capitalism which led to this precise revolt of popular culture. While the presented arguments may seem to set a morbid tone, capitalism is viewed as a gospel of death in postmodern America, portraying a well-documented cultural and socioeconomic reality. To that effect, this chapter intends to investigate the evolution of capitalism from wealth acquisition, engorged with murderous means as demonstrated by the Corleone business empire, to a deadly enemy depicted by the narrator’s compulsive consumerism. This consideration is drawn from the timeless insights of Thorstein Veblen on “conspicuous consumerism,” Michel Foucault’s views on the *Homo economicus* as a robotic engine of neo-capitalism and Jean Baudrillard’s theory of “*simulacra*” as a damaging outcome of this system. As it will be witnessed, all these works will firmly impose capitalism at the centre of the postmodern condition.

In the third chapter, this thesis will demonstrate how *The Godfather* and *Fight Club* attempt to demystify the religious and heroic narrative of the Manifest Destiny. The personal paradigm of the American antihero is revealed to investigate another American postmodern distortion. This part is particularly and purposefully built on a religious tone; this is not meant as an inspection on religion in America *per se*; religion is rather used as an element factor to explore the postmodern disillusionment with the narrative of divine election. Michael Corleone defies all forms of celestial authority, including that of his father – who is portrayed as a god – and the Catholic faith. He rises as an apotheosis in charge of his own unholy destiny. Tyler Durden, for his part, negates the religious doctrine of the Manifest Destiny by creating his own spiritual order. Additionally, both narratives alter the position of women from the defenseless damsel – a vital part of the patriarchal discourse of the Manifest Destiny – to the saviors of souls and consciousness in postmodern reality. To constitute this research, the third chapter will consider Joseph Campbell and Robert Bly’s views on the mythical and spiritual forms of divine and paternal authority.

The use of postmodern criticism to evaluate the progress of popular narratives seems convenient as both novels aim to depict the new forms of reality. According to Dino Felluga, an Associate Professor of English at Purdue University, popular culture stresses that the line between reality and illusion has “broken down,” which seems to attract a deep fascination from postmodernists (Felluga 229); he illustrates his claim by mentioning artistic productions in popular culture, such as *The Matrix* (1999) and *Inception* (2010). The postmodern condition suffers from a disconnection from history and an estrangement from reality where balance, contentment and progress are no longer fulfilled. The repercussions are severely witnessed in the rise of violence as the main theme in life – and eventually in postmodern literature. Manifested on a psychological and national scale, violence in American culture – as we shall see – represents an essential feature in the American Manifest Destiny.

3. A Theory of Violence in the American Mythogenesis

Joining the postmodern strivings to delegitimize the Manifest Destiny under a new antiheroic characterization in popular culture, violence – and its analytical grounds – is certainly entitled to an exclusive section. The mission of redeeming and regenerating humanity is an essential theme in the myth of the Manifest Destiny. The paragons of virtue by which America perceives and portrays itself denote an amplified discourse of grandiose self-esteem from a Christ-nation that could do no harm. To that effect, all instances of violent occurrences must be – and are indeed – redeemed, justified and legitimized. As part of its frontier experience to execute this destiny, the American nation regenerates through violence, and history documents an intricate process of glorifying, mystifying and mythologizing a ‘morally required’ state of brutality. As we fast-forward through the role of myth in creating a national collective identity, we discover the foundational elements of the myth of “regeneration through violence” as construed by Richard Slotkin.

3.1. Myth and the Collective Identity

In his *Creation Myths of the World: An Encyclopedia*, David Adams Leeming provides an explanation to the concept of myth that emphasizes its power as a spiritual manifestation, an innovative creation and a cultural aspiration (Leeming 18). The importance of myth resides in its ability to connect human experiences and build a collective consciousness. Leeming stresses its role in personal experiences like love and marriage or cultural fulfillment in a wider social context. He proposes to consider the human role in life itself for a better understanding and appreciation of myth. As human beings, we long for an imitation of reality and a transmission of awareness; that is, according to Leeming, the essence of myth.

Myth is responsible for creating a collective identity and is itself created by many forces of cumulative participations where each individual has his conscious and unconscious contribution to the nation’s myth. Slotkin confirms that myth making is “simultaneously a psychological and a social activity. It is articulated by individual artists and has its effects on the mind of each individual

participant,” but its function is to “reconcile and unite these individualities to a collective identity” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 8). Though created by several participants who conceive it differently, myth eventually functions as a collective emblem that reunites people under one national identity. Slotkin adds that a myth that “ceases to evoke this religious¹ response, this sense of total identification and collective participation, ceases to function as a myth” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 8). Thus, myth-making is a psychological process that requires a religiosity of devotion and engenders an instant identification shared among individuals of a certain nation. This, for Slotkin, represents the “evocative power” of myth.²

Slotkin explains how myth can either represent a universal archetype or a cultural archetype; the former “exhibits its power in many cultures over a period of time” while the latter is accentuated in one culture and relates “individual experience and psychology to collective history” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 11). He exemplifies this with the myth of the heroic quest, the myth of success and, more importantly, the myth of violence which is emphasized as a powerful cultural archetype that deeply characterizes the American cultural experience (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 11).

3.2. The Myth of Regeneration through Violence

According to Slotkin, myth is communicated through tales, images or objects that he calls *myth-artifact*. These myth-artifacts are symbolic in nature and make myth “concrete” and “communicable” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 10). Moreover, he explains how all myth-artifacts have a basic structure composed of three elements; a Universe, a Protagonist and a Narrative. First, the Universe in which the hero manifests his destiny represents a “reflection of the audience’s

¹ Slotkin uses the word “religious” as an adjective to denote the strict devotion by which people react to and preserve their cultural myths.

² Slotkin considers the role of myth in building a cultural identity as a “complex of narratives that dramatize the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 6). Myth is usually exaggerated into a tale that transcends human limitations to further glorify the nation’s uniqueness. Thus, the national character that emanates from such tales is derived from a mixture of real experiences and imaginative stories that reinforce the structure of national identity. Slotkin believes that a mythology is an “intelligible mask” that builds the national character (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 3). National identification often requires a common tale or a mythology which forms a bond between people. It, thus, provides common conceptions and features among diversities. The scholar identifies the “continual preoccupation” with creating a national identity as “myth-consciousness” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 3).

perception of the world and the gods” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 9). Second, the Protagonist is the main character or leader of the events, usually a national hero with whom the audiences identify. Finally, the Narrative – which in the case of the American mythogenesis represents the regeneration through violence – is the description of the interaction and events between the Protagonist and the Universe. Slotkin insists that the Protagonist and the Universe are dynamic and subject to change as they are altered by contextual and historical forces. The Narrative, however, is a static core which remains unchanged in the face of time and history. Evidently, it frames the mythical pattern that stands as a pillar for the American national experience.

3.2.1. The Universe: The Wilderness

The setting which nestles the Protagonist’s metamorphosis from an explorer to a hero and orchestrates the events of the Narrative is the wilderness. The untamed land is a significant pedestal that would constitute the first phase of the American national myth. As the original and central setting, the wilderness stresses the cultural differences between the European settlers and the savage Indians. For the colonists, it represented the absence of civilization where chaos and disorder reign supreme. For the Indians, however, it was hailed as a god, and every aspect and phenomenon was seen as a manifestation of nature’s organized cycle (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 51). This divergence accentuated a whole civility gap between the two cultures which eventually amplified the state and practice of violence between them. The settlers’ traditional heritage – both in terms of mythology and reality – could no longer maintain the bonds of cultural ropes as the New World imposed new visions, perspectives and experiences. Thus, the adjustment process was a violent and brutal progress, both with the Indians and with the wilderness itself.

3.2.2. The Protagonist

Slotkin elaborates on the “deep conflict” that the settlers underwent in their “initiation into a new world and a new life that is at the core of the American experience” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 79). The “imaginative elaboration” on the clash between Indian and settler and between civilization and wilderness would ultimately culminate to a resolution through violence. The literature portraying the frontier experience within these confrontations would eventually climax into “two distinctly different phases of mythological evolution” (Cawelti, *Myths* 538). Slotkin elaborates on two national mythical patterns that would emanate from these encounters; the ancestral captivity myth¹ and the hunter myth.

Though the captivity myth failed,² the marriage between the wilderness and its inhabitant was still arranged by nature’s law of physiological and psychological adaptation. The virgin land was still appealing to the adventurer who was yet to be groomed as the suitor Protagonist. Cawelti presumes that the “appeal of the wilderness” and the fascination of the Indian’s ways of life were so strong that a second myth developed and came to symbolize the final union between the white man and the wilderness (Cawelti, *Myths* 538).

¹ The first phase of the American mythogenesis depicted the Puritans with the wilderness and its Indian inhabitants. The Puritans, whose spiritual and religious rigor stressed self-discipline and strictness, inspected the Indians with an aloof vision. Their writings portrayed them as dark and savage creatures that were satanically wired to corrupt the divine path of self-righteousness (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 40). The protagonist in the captivity narrative is a white Christian, “tormented” and terrified by the savage Indian. The captive sought freedom by destroying the Indian who represented a Godly challenge to test his faith. Slotkin confirms that the captivity myth never attained the national level, consequently failing to constitute an American cultural archetype. According to him, the settlers’ strict religious fanaticism contained their quest at the individual level of chastity and salvation. Every endeavor sprang from religion and was bound to return to it. Their regeneration was overrun by the colossal forces of the wilderness, rendering their “scenario of historical action” a “passive one” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 39). Paradoxically, the zealotry of their closed religious circle did not engender a collective discourse that glorifies the American experience in the wilderness, and their focus remained exclusively related to the solitude of the personal spiritual path.

² The failure of captivity narrative in attaining the national myth should not be construed as a failure to engrave a historical heritage in the American character. As previously discussed, the Puritans planted the seeds of a holy journey into the wilderness as part of their manifest destiny to explore it. Thus, in their constant quest for rebirth and regeneration, they implemented this concept within the pillars of early American identity. The early instances they provided still resonate as ideological characteristics of myth-literature which is uniquely American (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 95). More importantly, their clash with the Indians is still part of modern literature as part of their imperishable heritage, as Slotkin confirms, “the savage war became a basic ideological convention of a culture that was itself increasingly devoted to the extermination or expropriation of the Indians” (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 13). Thus, the power of the Puritans’ heritage resides in implementing an ideological structure which not only defines the American mythogenesis, but also impacts factual reality.

The frontier myth portrays the Protagonist as a hunter hero whose essence is intertwined with the wilderness to achieve a harmonious unity. The wilderness, previously feared, becomes an enacting symbol of his newly-born American identity. His assimilation of the Indian's visions and practices distinguish him from the previous captive hero; Slotkin describes him as a "solitary, Indian-like hunter of the deep woods" (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 21). Thus, we already witness a new awareness regarding the wilderness/Indian, from extreme alienation to a congenial fusion. The hunter hero would become an archetypal American hero who reincarnates the strength of the wilderness and the patience of its endurance. He would build his identity accordingly and acquire new means of physical and spiritual transcendence.¹

3.2.3. The Narrative: Regeneration through Violence

The final myth-artifact which constitutes the American mythogenesis is the Narrative. The Protagonist's interaction with the Universe creates a narrative of violence through which he is able to achieve a rebirth and regenerate his spirit in the wilderness. Thus, violence would symbolize "the mythic significance" of the American experience, creating an archetypal narrative in which the process of regeneration is only achievable through violence, as Slotkin explains:

In American mythogenesis the founding fathers were not those eighteenth-century gentlemen who composed a nation at Philadelphia. Rather, they were those who...tore violently a nation from implacable and opulent wilderness... Regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience. (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 5)

Violence would be engraved as the "integral" part of the American mind, structuring the national myth on the basis of morally justifiable bloodshed for the regeneration of the American soul. It was implemented as a mandatory

¹ The wilderness becomes a symbol of the hero's past experiences while setting a definitive pattern for his futuristic evolutions, as Slotkin confirms, the hero is "the emigrant, the explorer, the captive, the convert, the hunter and the hero" (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 304). Thus, engraving the previous narratives while shaping the upcoming ones, the hunter hero incarnated the reconciliation with the mother land and the birth of the new American identity. Slotkin affirms that the myth of the hunter hero was elaborated in different legends and stories which grew around different personas such as that of Daniel Boone, and was given – as previously discussed – significant "literary expression" in James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* (Cawelti, *Myths* 538).

discourse to ensure the reconstruction of the American experience in the New World. Violence is carved within the constructs of the American mythogenesis which accentuates the uniqueness of this particular national myth.

Slotkin insists that the myth of “regeneration through violence” is part of the American’s personal process of self-cleansing and spiritual redemption. Violence is understood as a cultural process that has existed since the birth of the nation.¹ It has always been excused and legitimized as a necessary measure to regenerate the spirit of “progress” and success. According to Slotkin, each phase of American history necessitates a particular “form or scenario of violent action” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 11). In each case, violence as a national concept affects the personal identity of every American individual as it provides a sense of “redemption of American spirit or fortune” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 12).

As a static myth-artifact, the myth of “regeneration through violence” has defined and structured the American nation since its birth and is still part of the cultural fabric of American cultural and national identity. Cawelti expands the concept of regenerative violence in his studies of formulas in popular culture; he confesses: “Though Slotkin does not carry his analysis of the myth of “regeneration through violence” down to the present day, it is clear that it continues to inform the popular tradition of the western” (Cawelti, *Myths* 539). He admits that further inquiries are needed to see if this myth plays a determining role in other contemporary genres of violence such as the hard-boiled detective story and the gangster saga (Cawelti, *Myths* 539).

¹ As discussed before, the confrontations between the early settlers and the Indians culminated in horrendous acts of violence. This contradicts Turner’s belief of a democratic “meeting point” between the settlers and the Indians which allowed expansionist endeavors to grow within westward territories. This entails that violence was implemented by the early experiences of the Puritans as immigrants, explorers and captives of the New World. The frontier myth describes the union between the hero and the wilderness, achieved by killing the “savage” Indian which allows the hunter to enter the “spirit of the wilderness” and accomplish a rebirth (Cawelti, *Myths* 538). According to Slotkin, violence in this myth is “an initiation and a conversion in which [the hero] achieves communion with the powers that rule the universe beyond the frontiers and acquires a new moral character, a new set of powers or gifts, a new identity” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 551). Thus, violence determines the identity of the American hero, empowering him with the forces of the wilderness to usher him into his manifest destiny.

For Cawelti, the myth of “regeneration through violence” constitutes “the basic American way of dealing imaginatively with violence and that the other myths we have analyzed can be seen as versions of it” (Cawelti, *Myths* 540). Thus, this specific type of violence is a source from which all other forms of violence emanate as it represents a basic discourse for American popular culture.¹ To test the validity of Slotkin’s claims, this research humbly proposes to extend his insights by applying his theory on the narrative of Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* and Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*.

“Regeneration through violence,” as Slotkin suggests, is present in different forms in the narratives of the sixties. The cultural images that previously shaped the American mind, such as the American hero and Indian enemy, take other forms of cultural discourses. The scholar confirms: “The Indian-war metaphor became increasingly prominent in the rhetoric of counterinsurgency after 1961” (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 492); this metaphor is mirrored in different literary representations. *The Godfather* experiences an early postmodern frontier by fighting a new savage enemy and embracing another form of the wilderness while experiencing a rebirth or a resurrection with a new strength and awareness. The development of this myth in *The Godfather* would face the American mafia as the new enemy, the underworld as the savage wilderness and the rebirth of a new protagonist/frontier represented by Michael Corleone.

As part of Cawelti’s further inquiries, the myth of “regeneration through violence” is analyzed in the millennial context with Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*. Slotkin’s final accounts conclude his research with the context of the seventies, with Reagan’s presidency and the fiction of the “western nostalgia.” Thus, he does not extend his researches to the nineties and their representative

¹ Heike Paul’s book (mentioned in page 23) provides a thorough historical and analytical approach on the different narratives that allowed the birth of the American nation. These myths include the myth of Columbus and the ‘discovery’ of America, the Pocahontas myth, the myth of the Promised Land, the myth of the Founding Fathers, the myth of the melting pot, the myth of the American West, and the myth of the self-made man. Paul studies these myths from a conventional point of view and depicts their portrayal in literary classic and popular productions. This book provides a terrain of investigation for future researchers to inspect Slotkin’s claims and theory of “regeneration through violence.” An analytical process could examine the presence of violence in shaping and influencing Heike’s proposed American myths.

literary works. Ergo, this provides this thesis with an opportunity of continuation for Slotkin's and Cawelti's researches. Indeed, the myth of "regeneration through violence" takes, yet again, another form in the narrative of *Fight Club*. The war is not only against the enemy of consumerism, but is also an internal battle between the narrator and his split personality character Tyler Durden. The wilderness of America's greening breast is turned into sterile urban centers where the protagonist/frontier is faced with more bewildering challenges. The evolution of the myth of "regeneration through violence" from *The Godfather* to *Fight Club* reveals a new growing attitude underlying popular culture and its American receptive audiences.

Reenacting the frontier experience in postmodern times sheds light on the state of violence as an essential discourse of the Manifest Destiny. The fourth chapter attempts to prove that violence is not an inevitable repercussion, an inescapable evil or a moral necessity as America so feverishly proclaims. It is, however, part of the American mythogenesis, ingrained within the core of the American episode as soon as the concept of the New World was conceived. It is through violence that the nation manifests its destiny, strengthens its power and regenerates its omnipresence. Thus, the myth of the Manifest Destiny is mostly preserved, perpetuated and regenerated through another myth; that of regenerative violence.

To conclude with, this first chapter dealt with the conceptual and theoretical foundations of the thesis. The first section explained the concepts necessary for the research process, namely the concept of the Manifest Destiny, the American antihero, popular culture and popular literature. The second section detailed the theoretical structure; it proposed a preview on the postmodern theories which will help structure the literary analysis. Finally, it detailed Richard Slotkin's theory of "regeneration through violence." Evidently, each section exhausted the research methodology which entailed a preliminary view on how these theories will be applied on Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*.

The second chapter, entitled “Delegitimizing the Gospel of Death” launches the analytical journey of this thesis. It investigates how Puzo and Palahniuk’s novels portray the dark realities of American capitalism while denouncing the narrative of virtuous destiny. Through their violent and criminal paths, both Michael and Tyler attempt to delegitimize the Manifest Destiny from its narrative of virtuous selflessness.

Chapter Two:
Delegitimizing the Gospel of
Death

In a highly materialized world, the American antihero is often depicted as a victim of an uncontrollable force of capitalism. This economic and political system eventually proclaims the human being as a private property to puzzle him in the maze of its corporate structures. The resistance against this monster, as portrayed in popular literature, begins by a process of full-disclosure in which the antihero plays within the criminal strings of capitalism to denounce and expose its dark practices. It, then, evolves into a procedure of destruction in an attempt to reform the capitalist conditions and restore subjective authenticity. Evidently, both these experiences are culturally embedded as an expression of the antihero's Manifest Destiny in postmodern America.

Through its four sections, this chapter attempts to portray the element of the virtuous destiny as a metanarrative that functions to primarily legitimize the discourse of American capitalism. The first section provides a brief summary of the sampled novels to acquaint the reader with the plot and its events. The second section dives into the depths of legitimized American capitalism, and curiously wonders about what lies behind these historical and cultural attempts of justification. It attempts to investigate how capitalism eroded all ethical considerations only to foster a dark breed of robotic individuals acting upon the strings of murderous and consumerist capitalism. The third section dissects the metanarrative of the Manifest Destiny and investigates how it functions as a mission of personal fulfillment for both Michael Corleone and Tyler Durden. It aims to prove that this particular concept exceeds its simplistic aim of American virtuous pacifism to survive in postmodern times under a different narrative that affects and disrupts the human's inner development. Finally, the fourth section analyzes the changes that occurred to this particular narrative from a discourse of conventions in *The Godfather* to a discourse of inventions in *Fight Club*.

I. *The Godfather* and *Fight Club*: Summaries

Before embarking upon the analytical process, this first section provides a brief introduction to Mario Puzo and Chuck Palahniuk, as well as summaries of *The Godfather* and *Fight Club*. The main events of the plots are highlighted to familiarize – or remind – the reader with the core of both novels. The antiheroes and their roles are also briefly presented to initiate the inquisitive process.

1. *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo

Mario Puzo started his career as a writer with two novels, *The Dark Arena* (1955) and *The Fortune Pilgrim* (1965). These were two of his finest works, where the depth of war and imaginative experience shaped a memorable poetic form; however, they were poorly sold and ignored by the public and critics (Messenger 30). It would seem that Puzo attracted popular attention when he wrote a novel that corresponded to the stereotype of Italian immigrants as mobsters. Nonetheless, this world was portrayed from different angles and perspectives as the novel introduced new values of family love, communal unity, honor and respect. America was intrigued by the ambiguity of the characters, and *The Godfather* was hailed as *the* classic of its time (Messenger 30).

Despite this success, Puzo was disappointed with *The Godfather* and felt that his individual talents were not rightly addressed.¹ He would later on prove that his intellectual capacity was not limited to feeding the American audiences with exotic and dark figures; rather, it was creating an expressive form of art they could truly identify with. Puzo was also involved in the writing of the plot and screenplay of Richard Donner's movie *Superman* (1978), one of America's heroic prototype figures. Thus, *The Godfather* carved its way through the American consciousness precisely because it carried the essence of American experiences at its core story.

¹ For further readings on Mario Puzo and his artistic journey while writing *The Godfather*, students could consult his book *The Making of The Godfather* (1976).

The Godfather, published in 1969, details the story of the Corleone Family, an Italian American family based in New York City. The novel is set between 1945 and 1955, and provides the back story of Don Vito Corleone, head of the Corleone family. The story depicts the mafia world of New York underground in which five mobster families work in the shadows of their neighborhoods. The Don is the strongest of all families and maintains great power and control over justice and business. He is approached by Virgil Sollozzo who needs the Don's influence and protection for his narcotic smuggling. The conflict escalates into a war between the five families in which Michael Corleone, the Don's youngest son, emerges as the new leader.

Following the conventional sequence of events of a traditional plot, Puzo introduces the Corleone family at its highest position of power during the famous wedding scene. The joyful occasion sets a relaxing tone to the novel while simultaneously accentuating Don Vito Corleone's potency through his closed door meetings with his loyal 'friends'. Puzo ushers the reader through an emotional rollercoaster when he makes Michael Corleone murder Sollozzo and Captain McCluskey. This creates an unexpected climax that radically changes the character's trajectory and alters the conditions of the Corleone family. Through great efforts of legitimacy by the author, the reader experiences the denouement with great sympathy towards the ruthless criminal Michael eventually becomes. Thus, following Cawelti's insights of "Formula", Puzo remains a conventional adherent of the classical structure of the novel.

As previously discussed, Puzo's contempt towards his novel lies in its simplistic style; nevertheless, the author's modest, contemporary and colloquial language should not be construed as a disadvantage. In fact, this makes his novel accessible to the common reader who can easily decipher the hidden meaning behind each setting, character or event. Puzo masters the device of symbolism to intertwine his tale with mythical allegories which, ultimately, adds value to his modest oeuvre.

Starting with the main place of the setting, the secluded mall in which the Corleones reside in Long Island symbolizes the complete alienation of an ethnic family that refuses to abandon its ancestral Italian heritage. The family's imposition, however, within the heart of New York – the beating pulse of America – represents its power and control over the structures of society; it is, indeed, domination without integration. Moreover, Puzo's diction when reporting the conversations from within the Corleone members accentuates the ethnic boundaries. The Sicilian dialect through words such as "*Consigliere*," "*Sonna coca nostra*," "*cosa nostra*" are heavily used to express exclusivity and high esteem within the masterminds of society.

Within the lines of *The Godfather*, Puzo encrusts denotative lexemes that impregnate hidden meanings throughout the narrative. As murder is a lurking shadow behind most of the Corleone's actions, it is mainly eluded to through the symbol of animals. When Hollywood movie producer Jack Waltz refuses to obey the godfather by giving his godson a lead role, he wakes up to an horrifying scene: "Severed from its body, the black silky head of the great horse Khartoum was stuck fast in a thick cake of blood. White, reedy tendons showed. Froth covered the muzzle and those apple-sized eyes that had glinted like gold, were mottled the color of rotting fruit with dead, hemorrhaged blood" (Puzo 54). The reader is horrified by the manner with which Don Corleone decapitates Waltz' English racing horse, Khartoum, as part of his proposal of "an offer he can't refuse." The symbol of the beast matches the real nature of the Corleone family and the American underworld as a bestial organization ruling over a 'civil' society.

Through his simplistic style, Puzo is able to question the "root and legality" of power in the American society. The reader can assume that the Corleone Empire is a representation of the American state of affairs, with crime and violence as its rolling engine. By extension, the author is also able to skillfully design a meticulous psychological, spiritual and emotional transformation of the main character, as researcher Saja Khalil Najjar, from Hebron University, states: "Reading *The Godfather* novel, it is noticed that the novel is not simply a crime

novel revolving around the representation of family, justice, and thriller, rather, it is kind of deep research that studies the human psychology” (Najjar 17). Puzo excels in legitimizing *The Godfather*, redefining by that the gangster genre and, ultimately, creating a worldwide fan base that remains sympathetic to the main character, Michael Corleone.

Michael denies all relations with his family, wanting instead to lead a normal life by achieving his American Dream. He integrates the Ivy League Dartmouth College in Hanover. After enlisting in the U.S Marine Corps to fight over the Pacific Ocean, he is wounded in battle and receives an honorary award for his bravery. Michael becomes the perfect model for an American hero who would sacrifice his life for his country. Along with his American wife-to-be Kay Adams, his war heroism serves him as a bypass to integrate society as a ‘true’ American; however, he is met with severe rejection based on discriminatory and racial profiling.

As a round character, Michael Corleone is one of the most ambiguous antiheroes in American popular literature. As the audiences follow his evolution from an American hero to a mafia leader, they cannot precisely – or rather conclusively – pinpoint the triggering element that provoked this shift: family love, heroic sacrifice, tragic loss or a repressed criminal identity. The inquest is still in place whether Michael chose the underworld or the underworld simply made him an offer “he can’t refuse.” Tyler Durden, however, inaugurates the story of *Fight Club* with an exposed form of brutality and only escalates in intensity and gravity, creating one of the most energetic narrative experiences.

2. *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk

Chuck Palahniuk has been distinguished in the world of popular literature with his original and transcendent themes. The cinematographic adaptation of *Fight Club* by director David Fincher in 1999 has turned the novel into a cult, and the author into a *New York Times* best-seller. Beside *Fight Club*, Palahniuk is also known for other pieces including *Survivors* (1999), *Invisible Monsters* (1999), *Choke* (2001) and *Lullaby* (2002). His writing style is peculiar as it

mostly focuses on the effects that social and cultural norms have on characters, and the illicit ways they use to break free.

Fight Club, published in 1996, follows an unnamed narrator who suffers from severe cases of disillusionment, depression and profound insomnia. The plot presents him held hostage with a gun in his mouth atop a building rigged with explosives. A flashback is then needed to unfold the events. The narrator is the representative of the postmodern man, controlled by the materials he purchases and dominated by the cult of consumerism. In his search for authentic human contact and 'sincere' emotions, he temporarily attends various support groups for people with terminal diseases to console his anguish. His state of mind worsens when he meets Marla Singer, an intruder who interrupts his illusion, and a split of consciousness is witnessed through his alter ego; Tyler Durden.

Tyler controls the main events in *Fight Club* that would culminate to mass destruction. Support groups would no longer be sufficient to fill the void the narrator experiences. Thus, a primitive sense of violence is needed to awaken him both figuratively and literally from his numbness. Tyler establishes a fight club where men with different backgrounds, occupations and personalities meet every night and fight each other with their bare hands, simply to share a real experience that allows them to touch body and soul. This fight club develops into Project Mayhem, a terrorist organization with the goal of restructuring society and bringing down modern civilization.

Breaking all chains of traditional writing styles, Palahniuk distinguishes himself with new "hi-tech" modern forms that provide the reader with a dynamic and exciting reading experience. In a documentary entitled "Postcards from the Future: The Chuck Palahniuk Documentary" (2003), Palahniuk states: "my commitment, when I started writing was to write the kind of books that would bring the people back from music videos, from video games, back from movies and television and would serve them in the way that all those other forms of entertainment were serving them" (Podcasts 2003). In most of his novels, the author writes in a "conversation-like" style that makes his narratives both fluid and pleasant. According to Cawelti's insights of "Formula," the "oral-based

language” is an invention of popular culture, a badge of honor for a revolutionary writer who is willing to break all boundaries of literary fiction.

Departing from the traditional descriptive storylines, Palahniuk focuses on “verbal storytelling,” fast pace plot and “paratactic style” (Minarik 36). The author also relies on repetition to create a “chorus” form pattern. This technique is meant to provide a “comfortingly stabilizing” effect that constructs a ritual with a reader (Minarik 38). Palahniuk enhances the “physical response” to involve the reader in a bodily experience with the novel. For instance, the first pages of *Fight Club* open with an evocative image: “With a gun stuck in your mouth and barrel of the gun between your teeth, you only talk in vowels” (Palahniuk 3). These details force the readers to mimic on their own bodies the implied instructions, unconsciously engaging their senses with the core of the narrative.

Another revolutionary literary technique Palahniuk masters in *Fight Club* is the use of “factoids” which are mainly short formulated facts that touch upon the fields of physics, biology or history. Admittedly, these factoids have become “a trademark of his writings” that can be found in most of his novels (Minarik 39). In *Fight Club*, for instance, this could be detected in the detailed recipes of explosives that provide intricate explanations on the chemical process. According to researcher Michal Minarik, from Masaryk University, Palahniuk uses these pieces of information not only to entertain, but also to “strengthen the connection between the book and reality and thus enable the reader to relate to it” (Minarik 43).

The use of dark humor is also one of Palahniuk’s most famous signature styles. Particularly in *Fight Club*, humor plays an important role as it is adopted to attack the system and the higher social classes:

"Fat," the mechanic says, "liposuctioned fat sucked out of the richest thighs in America. The richest, fattest thighs in the world."

Our goal is the big red bags of liposuctioned fat we'll haul back to Paper Street and render and mix with lye and rosemary and sell back to the very people who paid to have it sucked out. At twenty bucks a bar, these are the only folks who can afford it.

"The richest, creamiest fat in the world, the fat of the land," he says.

"That makes tonight a kind of Robin Hood thing." (Palahniuk 97)

Employing controversial – often impolite – terms, Palahniuk uses a cynical tone to mock and ridicule the trivialities of the higher classes. This cynicism is quite intense in other passages, foreshadowing the violent events that will proceed. Evidently, Palahniuk has been a target for critics who have conflicting feelings and views about his style, especially humor. According to Douglas Keeseey, professor of film and literature at California Polytechnic State University, Palahniuk has been “loathed and loved in equal measure for his dark humor, edgy topics, and confrontational writing style” (Keeseey, 2016). His depictions of psychological distress, violence, sexual tensions and religious institutions have caused a major friction in the academia. Keeseey believes that Palahniuk’s style attracts a worldwide fan base;¹ nevertheless, many critics accuse him of being “an angry nihilist and a misanthrope” (Keeseey, 2016).

Resuming the comparison between Puzo and Palahniuk’s antiheroes, both Michael and Tyler play within the forces of capitalist America in an attempt to remedy their social or psychological situations. The conditions of capitalism are depicted through the subjugating effects experienced by Michael and the narrator. After realizing that power is the only means through which he could integrate the American society, Michael surrenders his soul to capitalist America. He renounces his desired status of the American hero and accepts his fate as a cyber *Homo economicus* to ensure the continuity of the Corleone family. *Fight Club*, for its part, portrays the effects of capitalism in shaping and deteriorating the psychological state of the postmodern man. American capitalism derailed

¹ According to Minarik, thousands of teenagers made Tyler Durden the representation of their role model. The popularity of the character led, for example, to the creating the religion of “Durdenism,” stating its basic motto: “what God created in six days, we will burn on the seventh.” For many, Tyler Durden has become a “cultural symbol” (Minarik 52).

from its free spirit of entrepreneurship to become an enslaving overpowering system, the details of which are to be explained in the following section.

II. Manifesting Soulless Capitalism

Capitalism has always accompanied the American nation since its birth. The spirit of free enterprise was instilled among the first colonies in America. As the complexities of history and culture progressed, capitalism grew stronger in the American society. It evolved from the Agrarian economy of Thomas Jefferson to the industrialization of the nineteenth century. Twentieth century capitalism dominated and modernized the US economy through industries and business tycoons. American capitalism nowadays possesses a powerful domestic industry that runs on a philosophy of advertisement and consumerism. It is increasingly evolving into the global power we witness today by which the United States is controlling the world.¹

The following section ploughs into the nature of capitalist practices. It first contextualizes capitalism within American history to provide a brief exposition on how it diverted from economic freedom to a “soulless” system. It, then, focuses on the specifics of the capitalist agendas as depicted in *The Godfather* and *Fight Club*. As part of Mario Puzo’s attempts to instill his novel within the bowls of American culture, capitalism is an inheritance to which the characters devote their lives. *Fight Club*, on its part, portrays the effects material success has on the human psychological and intellectual capacities.

The crisis of capitalism with its ethical deficiencies is heavily projected in literary productions of American popular culture. Popular literature exposes the dark frontage of capitalism that often diverts from the Americanized version of material ‘freedom’ in the pursuit of happiness. In Puzo’s *The Godfather*, capitalism is maintained by an inherited American practice of crime and murder, encrusting the Corleone family – along with its secluded Italian community –

¹ For further readings on the history of capitalism in America, students could check *Capitalism in America* (2018) by Alan Greenspan and Adrian Wooldridge. The book provides a deep historical research on the constructs of capitalism and how it has been instilled in the social and cultural fabric of the American nation. The authors follow the development of capitalism in each phase of American history and how the “power” and “prosperity” of each phase helped in making America a capitalist global hegemony.

within the mold of American culture. *Fight Club*, for its part, presents an updated version of an unhinged state of capitalism, where the retrogression to a postmodern form of slavery is achieved through sedative consumerism.

1. The American Enterprise of Crime

The confrontations of capitalism with ethical considerations engender a variety of positions and perspectives; some in defense of capitalism as the guarantor of political freedom and democracy and others which consider it as the main cause for the degeneration of humanity. Marie-Laure Salles-Djelic, Professor at the Sciences Po Centre of Organisational Sociology, focuses in her essay “How Capitalism Lost its Soul” on the contemporary transformations of capitalism and its practices that create ethical conflicts based on universally moral grounds.¹

According to Salles-Djelic, American capitalism was already on its way to “losing its soul” during the last decades of the nineteenth century,² progressing as a “disenchanted iron cage” (Salles-Djelic 45). Salles-Djelic argues that there are two major reasons behind this process of disenchantment; the rapid increase of social Darwinism and the institutional transformations which were reshaping American capitalism and altering its essential purpose of economic freedom.

¹ According to Salles-Djelic, there are at least four different perspectives that attempt to explain the confrontations of capitalism with ethics. The first one she terms the “missionary perspective” which is associated with the liberal tradition of securing human economical liberties. The second one Salles-Djelic calls the “Nietzschean” perspective which places capitalism “beyond – or before – ethics.” The third perspective takes an extreme stand against capitalism and considers it as a “profoundly and essentially” unethical system. It is usually associated with the Marxist tradition which considers capitalism as an engine for personal greed and thirst for power that eventually leads to different forms of exploitation. Finally, Salles-Djelic labels the fourth perspective as the “regulatory one” which does not consider capitalism as a naturally ethical or self-regulating system. The aim here is to invest in “regulatory efforts to create conditions for ethical behaviors and interactions” (Salles-Djelic 44). Through time, these four perspectives have co-existed, connecting different positions that attempt to find middle grounds between capitalism and ethics. In her genealogical journey, Salles-Djelic concludes that capitalism has historically shifted from a system with a “strong ethical foundation” to a system that “has lost its soul” under a load of pressure, making it “a-moral or a-ethical” (Salles-Djelic 44).

² The age of Robber Barons introduced brutal tactics of “violent” and “rapacious behavior” that characterized American capitalism. The wild competition of that time witnessed a struggle of the “weak” and his eventual elimination from the market. The brutal use of power in the context of economic freedom was an essential element for progress. This eventually created an unequal division of labor and a toxic environment that fostered social injustice (Salles-Djelic 61). As the context advances, this “soulless” capitalism would amplify its artilleries in a progressively industrialized market.

Following a natural course of events, capitalism in America was maintained by “the survival of the fittest,” a phrase coined by the English philosopher Herbert Spencer to become an iconic idiom in American economic practices (Salles-Djelic 60). Progress became synonymous to an “end that justifies the means” which was essential to the system (Salles-Djelic 61). The spiritual dimensions, as well as ethical considerations, were eliminated from the practices of capitalism until it became a self-reinforcing “soulless” engine.

The new engine of “soulless” capitalism relies on the *Homo economicus*¹ as an “enterprise” who takes a leading role in the functioning of capitalist institutions.² Admittedly, his implicit characteristics are self-centered individualism, optimizing behavior, robotic rationality and high calculative tendencies. In the case of American socioeconomic structures, this ensures the effective function of “a-ethical” capitalism, clouded and legitimized under different cultural discourses. Regardless of regulations and laws, he acts lawfully and unlawfully according to his human instincts (Meyer 441). Several scientists believe that the current conditions of capitalism are due to his selfishness and egocentrism (Meyer 442). Since the *Homo economicus* acts upon his instincts, this usually leads to individualistic doctrines. In fact, several narratives in popular culture depict the reality of the *Homo economicus*’ pitfalls and consequences on postmodern economy (Gloger 166).

¹ The term could be traced to John Stuart Mill’s use of the phrase “economic person” in his work *On the Definition of Political Economy* (1836). Mill describes a person whose nature is economic in conduct and motives, and whose drive and focus is the accumulation of wealth. Thus, the “economic person” handles his policies “solely” on the basis of his economic needs and instincts. Elaborating on this argument, Foucault believes that the *Homo economicus* is someone who “pursues his own interest” (Foucault, *The Birth* 270). To that effect, he must be left to his economic devices; he is “the subject or object of laissez – faire” (Foucault, *The Birth* 270).

² The new engine of “soulless” capitalism relies on two factors to maintain its stability; the market and the agent. In a highly industrialized society, the market would have to be a model upon which all political and social relations ought to be built. The second factor which plays a key role in the function of the market is the worker. Foucault calls this agent the “entrepreneur,” or the *Homo economicus*, and defines his power as a “conception of capital-ability which, according to diverse variables, receives a certain income that is a wage, an income-wage, so that the worker himself appears as a sort of enterprise for himself” (Foucault, *The Birth* 225). Thus, the worker is no longer a passive object, but an active member, responsible for the state of his market. As an “enterprise” himself, he takes a leading role in the functioning of capitalist institutions. Foucault insists that the particular surge of neoliberalism in the United States is achieved by “a return to *Homo oeconomicus*.”

The Godfather depicts the discourse of capitalism in America through the mafia empire and the power of the Corleone family. As the Corleones build their business and accumulate their wealth, they increase their authority in the mafia underworld and within the American social and juridical institutions. Mario Puzo sheds light on American capitalism while discarding the ‘virtuous’ American narrative and depicting a more straightforward discourse. Evidently, Michael Corleone is depicted as a *Homo economicus* agent in nature, working and maintaining the underworld market. He acquires a strong position in the mafia world and in society by maximizing his self-interests and utilitarian strategies, practices deeply inherited from his American culture.

Individualism is the first predominant characteristic of the *Homo economicus*. Individuals, in their nature, “think, decide and act according to their own interests” (Urbina & Villaverde 66). This trait entails a personal gratification of self-interest and encourages hard work and self-reliance. Contrary to common belief, the individualistic person could worry about the welfare of others if it affects his own; this is due to “the desire to feel noble about being a “good person” or wanting to prevent the suffering of others in order not to “feel bad oneself” (Urbina & Villaverde 66). Foucault joins this argument by describing the *Homo economicus* as someone devoted to serving his own interests and “whose interest is such that it converges spontaneously with the interest of others” (Foucault, *The Birth* 270). Thus, his individualist endeavors are unintentionally related to his psychological and social behavior. Though the *Homo economicus* is individualistic in nature, he still worries about his position and status among others.

Through his proclaimed alienation, Michael wishes to secure his personal self-interests by being financially independent from his father. The profile he creates for himself outside his family’s circle helps him build a self-sufficient persona where he is free to roam capitalist America and achieve his own American Dream by being a mathematics professor. With no considerations of sentimental aspects, this individualistic spirit reflects the American creed of pragmatic individualism and self-reliance. The shooting of the godfather,

however, diverts Michael's individualism to the welfare of his family. His position shifts from being the "sissy of the family" to being a man with "the quit force and intelligence of his great father" (Puzo 8). Since he proves himself the only eligible heir in times of crisis, he carries his father's business empire while protecting the interests of his family.

The *Homo economicus* is, to use Foucault's term, the "grid of intelligibility." He makes use of the most effective resources available to him, optimizing his behavior according to the interests he could gain. Trying to make the best of any situation he is put in, he always seeks to take advantage of the means and resources he is presented with. Thus, he becomes an "instantaneous calculator of pleasures and pains, costs and benefits" (Urbina & Villaverde 66). The *Homo economicus* maximizes his utility purposes by closely monitoring his invested capital, and attempts to augment his profits by analyzing his costs possibilities (Urbina & Villaverde 66).

Michael's optimizing behavior is best portrayed in the way he handles his affairs with Moe Greene. Mr. Greene is portrayed as a wealthy and powerful man who owns a casino in Las Vegas. His role in the novel is very minimal; however, it allows the reader to see Michael as a businessman for the first time, with no influence or direction from his father. Since Freddie Corleone is in a state of shock after the shooting of his father, he seeks refuge in Las Vegas under the protection of Moe Greene in exchange for money. When Michael receives the responsibility of the family business, he starts evaluating the profits of his family's investment:

Your casino has been losing money against all the odds. There's something wrong with the way you operate. Maybe we can do better ... The Corleone Family and you are evened out. I don't know what you're getting sore about. We'll buy your share at any reasonable price you name, what's wrong with that? What's unfair about that? With your casino losing money we're doing you a favor. (Puzo 328)

Michael insists on forcefully buying Moe's shares of the casino to become its sole owner. His behavior reflects an acute rationality which helps him maximize the interests of his business. Though the effectuated payment was to ensure Freddie's protection, Michael does not consider its emotional value and focuses instead on its material implications. He attempts to magnify his profits by being directly implicated in the investment of his money. This optimizing behavior is reasonably legitimate according to him as he does not perceive any form of irregularity in his conduct. For Michael, this business deal is "an offer he can't refuse," insinuating Moe's inability to decline it.

The *Homo economicus* handles and processes information with "full rationality." He is required to logically process all the facts presented to him in order to make an adequate decision about his business; he "must be totally objective regarding the characteristics of the options from which to make a decision, without falling into any kind of cognitive bias" (Urbina & Villaverde 66). Thus, the *Homo economicus* must not be driven by his personal judgments or subjective opinions; instead, he must lead his business according to evenhanded decisions to maximize his profits and increase his gains.

Michael suddenly finds himself in charge of a falling empire which he has to lead and revive. The mafia organization, which reigns according to blood ties and hierarchal authority, stands on a "dog-eat-dog" principle where the survival is for the fittest. Michael proves himself worthy of such position through a series of rational actions that restore his family's power and dignity. Researcher James Combs analyzes Michael's rationality in business and states:

Michael Corleone is the ultimate Machiavellian, the heir of the family business he wants to make legitimate and diversified in the 1950's. He fulfills the role of the rational executive, through adroit business moves, political connections, and selective violence. Whereas violence in the chaotic and disintegrating society of Brooklyn was anomic and random, for an organization motivated by profit maximization and corporate power violence is a major means to predetermined ends ... Michael's actions are calculated, and this extends to personal relations. (Combs 90)

Indeed, Michael's business deals are all conducted with extreme rationality in order to amplify his profits. His decisions are not subject to sentimental weaknesses or personal judgments; this is reflected in his actions which are carefully calculated, focused on expending his financial relations and maximizing his interests. Violence and criminality, as Combs stresses, are his means of execution to enforce his policies. To that end, Michael's rational acts help him gain the position of the new emperor of the underworld with no particular consideration for the state of criminality he is involved in.

The behavior of the *Homo economicus* is applicable in all situations. Though the personal conditions and circumstances may differ, his target remains focused on his maximizing objectives. This constitutes a simplified characteristic of prioritizing interests, no matter the times and events that surround him (Urbina & Villaverde 67). Moreover, the utility of a *Homo economicus* is not restricted to monetary gains but could be applied to many situations including personal motives and "decisions of when and whom to marry" (Rankin 1). In his *Treaties on the Family*, American economist Gary S. Becker writes:

[The] economic approach is not restricted to material goods and wants or to markets with monetary transactions, and conceptually does not distinguish between major and minor decisions or between "emotional" and other decisions. Indeed ... the economic approach provides a framework applicable to all human behavior—to all types of decisions and to persons from all walks of life. (Becker 10)

Becker emphasizes an important point in which the material needs are at a crossroad with the emotional necessities of the individual. Stressing Foucault's previous claims, Becker believes that the *Homo economicus* applies his materialistic instincts even in his intimate interactions. In other words, he calculates his emotional and private relations on gain and benefit basis. Though this characteristic may seem dismal, the fact remains that all social and individual interactions contain a portion of materialistic considerations for the people involved. Although the degree of these attentions differs according to personal

principles, all relationships, from family ties, friendships to marriages, contain a material aspect that must be present in different forms and proportions.

Michael's calculative tendency progressively "extends to personal relations" (Combs 90). He amplifies his economic approach with all his personal and social relations, especially with his American girlfriend Kay Adams. The purpose of his marriage with her is to expand his powers and integrate the American society. This integration represents a long life dream which he wants to experience through his future children. In what seems to be a professional eloquence to win a business deal, he asks her hand for marriage by saying: "Anyway I don't want that to happen to our kids. I want them to be influenced by you. I want them to grow up to be All-American kids, real All-American, the whole works" (Puzo 306). Michael rations her presence as a business agreement he has to close; therefore, his extreme calculative tendencies extend to his most intimate relationships which make Kay another element in his rational organization process.

Michael Corleone carries the torch of his father through more savage means. He spends his early life fighting against the injustices that eventually draw him into the world of crime. Foucault believes that by considering the individual subject as a *Homo economicus*, there is often the consequence of a crime surge. In this case, the criminal is "treated only as anyone whomsoever who invests in an action, expects a profit from it, and who accepts the risk of a loss" (Foucault, *The Birth* 253). This also means that, in this perspective, he is "not distinguished in any way by or interrogated on the basis of moral or anthropological traits" (Foucault, *The Birth* 253). Evidently, Michael's way of restoring his family's reputation and securing his father's business require many illegal acts and savage crimes; Combs illustrates this point by stating:

[Michael] must compete against the legal-rational structures of the State and corporate power... Michael represents the strong myth not only of the tough individual against the System, but also of the person who runs the family business competing in a hostile world against the Big Boys. He is a killer in a world of killers, who must accept the loneliness of taking on great responsibility. Because of his entrepreneurial skill and ruthlessness, the organization prospers, expanding into new markets in Las Vegas and Havana. So in an era that extolled the managerial ethos of big organizations, he is an exemplar of the myth of organizational rationality... The rational world as well as the anomic world is at war, and the mythologic of kill or be killed prevails. (Combs 90)

Michael's desire to expand the Corleone Empire or even to legitimize it necessitates more ruthless crimes than his father ever committed. He becomes an archetypal character in the myth of the "killer or be killed." His violent fight demands a series of illegal actions such as murder, threatening, bribing or blackmailing. The responsibility of his father's business indulges him in a world of murderers where survival requests the ruthless killer he eventually becomes. Both father and son are self-made men who embrace the experience of death (of others) in the construction of their business empire.

The Godfather becomes a source of inspiration for a multitude of archetypal patterns in popular culture. According to Paula Brown, a Professor at Louisiana Tech University, this saga sets a "seductive parent-criminal archetype" which influences future popular fiction works, including Vince Gilligan's crime drama television series *Breaking Bad* (2008). Walter White (played by Bryan Cranston) is an unappreciated and underpaid high-school chemistry teacher who is diagnosed with stage-three lung cancer which worsens his financial troubles. As a parent to a crippled teenage son and an unborn daughter, Walter has to secure a financial future for his children before he dies. He turns into a life of crime by producing and selling crystallized methamphetamine which turns him into one of the biggest most dangerous drug barons in the country.

The transformation of Walter White from a submissive white collar worker into an entrepreneur of crime emphasizes the effects of capitalism on the personal journey of the character. The justification of securing the family's financial situation erodes as he is cured from cancer by season three. Still driven

by the greed to succeed beyond reasonableness, Walter carries on growing his drug business into an empire. In his last interaction with his wife Skyler, she asks him why he has led their family into such chaos, to which he confesses: “All the things that I did... I did it for me, I liked it. I was good at it and I was really... alive” (*Breaking Bad* 2008). Like Michael, the murderous path of material success detaches him from his human side. It exteriorizes his demon and sets him forward to manifest his destiny as a new man, reborn into crime with full awareness of his potentials as an entrepreneur in capitalist America.

The psychological effects of capitalism – crimes and murder included – seem to be disregarded in Puzo’s novel. As a new emperor, Michael is depicted at the prime of his capitalist success and violent path. The ending-results, however, are best depicted in Francis Ford Coppola’s cinematographic continuum *The Godfather III* (1990), also known as, *Mario Puzo's The Godfather, Coda: The Death of Michael Corleone*. An old Michael Corleone is hunted by his tormented consciousness over the ruthless murders he had committed, especially that of his brother Fredo. Wrecked by guilt and regret, he attempts to relieve his mind by cocooning in the religious nest of the Vatican. He donates millions of his accumulated wealth to charitable causes and alleviates his spirit by confessing his murders and asking for redemption.

Michael strives to exit the underworld business and to “sin no more,” but he is constantly “pulled back in.” He also asks for forgiveness from his divorcee Kay and tries to reignite their romance and reunite with his son Anthony and daughter Mary. This dream crumbles when, during the film’s denouement, Mary pays the ultimate price for her father’s sins. She is the collateral damage to an attempt to murder Michael and settle the underworld business. As he hugs the soulless body of his daughter, he unleashes an agonizing scream that reflects his unbearable pain. Years later, Michael is seen alone in a courtyard of an empty villa in Sicily, when suddenly, he drops from his chair to the floor, symbolizing his tragic death and finalizing the movie.

We retire Michael in Puzo's novel with a hopeful note that he might one day concretize his dream of legitimizing the family business and integrating the American society. We bid him farewell in a lamentable state in Coppola's work after he has clearly become the incarnation of the monster he had fought his entire life. In his battle to legitimize the Corleone capitalist empire, Michael succumbs under its fatalistic powers. He fails to save his marriage, his family and his last years in life from the strings of the business he has himself helped build. While the emperor decays, the empire survives and American capitalism persists.

While *The Godfather* depicts the psychological redemption through religion, *Fight Club*, for its part, portrays it as a submission to consumption. The survival of American capitalism generates new forms of psychological disorders in the form of sedative consumerism. This consumerist capitalism represents the postmodern condition of utter dismay and deterioration of spirit.

2. The Lethal Form of Postmodern Slavery

Fight Club exposes the intrusive effects of American capitalism on the postmodern human psyche. As society indulges further into the cult of consumerism, the psychological deterioration is intensified. The depth of this issue exceeds the simplistic diagnosis of pointless lifestyle, compulsive buying or chronic depression; it represents more aggravated conditions, including the estrangement from reality and the disintegration of consciousness, demonstrated by the psychological condition of schizophrenia.

Chuck Palahniuk exhibits the symptoms of the disease of consumerism which was diagnosed by many theoreticians that foresaw the effects of capitalism on the postmodern man. American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen prophesied this condition in his well-known *The Theory of the Leisure Class*¹ (1899), in which he theorized the function of social classes and institutions under the rules of capitalism from feudal times to the modern era. He provided a critique of "conspicuous consumption" to denounce the uselessness of the leisure

¹ In his *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, Veblen presents an economic and social critique of "Western civilised communities." He believes that the industrial Western societies created a spirit of "emulation" which diverted from its positive sense to represent a culture of "conspicuous waste." After the fulfillment of the basic (physical) needs, the industrial efficiency of the West created an output of unnecessary goods.

class, or the leisure class, in the contract of economic practices within a society. Veblen put forward his insights in relation to the nineteenth century where the middle and working classes were struggling to be efficient and productive; yet, his identified disease of “conspicuous consumption” outlives his context to remain as a cancerous condition which metastases in postmodern times in all social classes.

Veblen expresses his views on the needlessness of most purchased items in a highly consumerist society; he states: “Many items of customary expenditure prove on analysis to be almost purely wasteful” (Veblen 70). This reestablishes the “wasteful expenditure” as a standardized pattern shared by all consumerist societies in a new form of “growing colonization” by commodities. He carries on: “The articles or forms of consumption to which the consumer clings with the greatest tenacity are commonly the so-called necessities of life, or the subsistence minimum” (Veblen 73). The reality, however, is that these so-called “necessaries” are, in fact, extravagant expenditures that the “consumer” uses to hopefully reach self-fulfillment and achieve personal authenticity. Consumerism is, thus, seen as a form of disorder that triggers the psychological mechanism.

Palahniuk presents a powerful critique of consumerism by reflecting its damaging effects on personal authenticity and human psyche. *Fight Club* portrays the narrator as a consumer whose authentic spirit has been eroded under the load of trivial commodities. The market presented in *Fight Club* is highly industrialized and the availability and diversity of production is best depicted through IKEA, a European multinational group that designs and sells furniture and home accessories.¹ The variety of designs it offers and the rapidity of the manufacturing process elude the narrator into a false sense of control and ownership. The commodities he purchases have no use or exchange value; instead, they are an attempt to fill a sentimental and spiritual void.

¹ The company of IKEA provides an appropriate example for the *Homo economicus*. As part of a highly industrialized market, it creates a philosophy of “quick response” and “quick manufacturing.” This means that the market responds to the needs of the *Homo economicus* in a short time with rapidly available productivity. More importantly, this is done at a very affordable price which makes the purchasing all the more easier. These economic factors allow a diversity of production between materials and designs, and provide the buyer with a feeling of ownership and possession. This particular issue has engendered a great deal of research in the field of psychology, psychiatry and marketing (Urbina & Villaverde 82).

Foucault comments on the return to the theory of the *Homo economicus* in the neo-liberal terms of productivity and confirms that consumption is not simply a process of exchange of products with monetary value. He believes that we should revolutionize our perception of the man of consumption; insofar as “he consumes; [he] is a producer” (Foucault, *The Birth* 226). But, what does he produce? Foucault asks. Quite simply, he “produces his own satisfaction” (Foucault, *The Birth* 226). In other words, consumption, on the basis of capital, is an enterprise by which the individual satisfies his psychological discrepancies.

The narrator relies on the enterprise of consumption he has at his disposal to create a temporary satisfaction. The plague of “conspicuous consumption” is demonstrated through his desperate need to purchase trivial commodities. Adopting them as vital “necessities,” he worships his collections of objects and expects them to tranquilize his overwhelming sense of despair:

You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple years you're satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you've got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes.
Then the perfect bed.
The drapes.
The rug.
Then you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you. (Palahniuk 23)

The search for the “perfect” commodity soothes the narrator and offers a temporary relief. This uncontrollable compulsive consumption sedates his senses and provides a continuum for his comfortable illusion. The things he purchases end up controlling him and trapping him into a “nest” of momentary happiness. The narrator is caged in a lethal form of slavery which makes him dwell even further in his depressive state of mind.

The narrator is a product recall specialist at an unnamed car company, a job which participates in his daily mind torture. His task is to investigate the defected products returned after an incident that may have endangered the consumer. In order to protect the company’s image and limit the legal and financial repercussions, the narrator must analyze the damages resulting from car crashes

and determine the economic costs that must be repaid to the injured party. To use Harman's words on this issue: "Death is subordinate to profit, merely a regrettable hindrance to profit making" (Harman 206). Evidently, his work forces upon him a process of dehumanization whereby human lives are reduced to monetary retributions to preserve the company's name and credibility.

The confusion over the perception of reality is among the colossal effects of consumerism. Jean Baudrillard elaborates on this condition in his theory of "Simulacra" in which he designates the process of producing "models of a real without origin or reality," resulting in an acute condition of "hyperreal" (Baudrillard, *The Precession* 1). Thus, the simulation would precede the real in a "precession of simulacra," engendering a transformation of reality into fragmented images which would eventually replace and eclipse the very existence of that reality. Baudrillard adds, "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (Baudrillard, *The Precession* 2). Baudrillard is not merely invoking the concept of artificiality as the dominant form of postmodernist culture – as artificiality still requires the image of reality to recognize "the artifice;" – rather, he is pointing to a much deeper issue which denotes the loss of ability to effectively distinguish between reality and the artifice.

The narrator often dwells: "Everything is so far away, a copy of a copy of a copy. The insomnia distance of everything, you can't touch anything and nothing can touch you" (Palahniuk 8). The simulation of reality is intensified and eventually deprives him from his basic and physiological need of sleep. The "copy" replaces and distances the real to the point where it becomes an untouchable entity. This disassociation from the real and its simulation would further detach the narrator from reality and reduce his function to a mere spectator, unable to evoke his human senses in a state of overwhelming hyperreal. As Baudrillard confirms, this hyperreal is separated from the imaginary and, ultimately, from the real itself, leaving the narrator in an "orbital recurrence of models" (Baudrillard, *The Precession* 2).

The estrangement from reality affects several aspects in the narrator's life. Baudrillard confirms that the process of simulacra is the production of an "infinite" number of "miniaturised units" and "command models," rendering the real "no longer rational" and merely "operational" (Baudrillard, *The Precession* 2). The narrator experiences the highest forms of this operational hyperreality and becomes, in Baudrillard's terms, a "living phantom." His agony is intensified by the rapid mobility that disassociates him from reality. As he stresses at the beginning of the novel, his job forces him to travel all the time: "You wake up at O'Hare. You wake up at LaGuardia. You wake up at Logan... You wake up at Dulles... You wake up at Love Field" (Palahniuk 11). The notion of time is simulated through an "infinite" number of trips he undertakes. As an active agent in the constructs of capitalism, the narrator is desensitized and stunned when facing the harmful effects this system has on his psychological development.

Baudrillard remains pessimistic towards the recovery from hyperreality. He believes that "never again will the real have to be produced," even in the event of death, hyperreality remains a "vital function" (Baudrillard, *The Precession* 2). The narrator's stressful job and constant travels affect his psychological well-being as he becomes severely insomniac and often suicidal: "Every takeoff and landing, when the plane banked too much to one side, I prayed for a crash. That moment cures my insomnia with narcolepsy when we might die helpless and packed human tobacco in the fuselage" (Palahniuk 11). Aside from the obvious depressive agonies, the experience of hyperreality torments the narrator to the point of wishing for the relief of death which remains a persistently "vital function" in the process of his inner-decaying.

Baudrillard's considers the state of hyperrealism as "pathos of overexposure."¹ This is certainly reflective of advertisement schemes, a major

¹ In his essay "The Ecstasy of Communication," Baudrillard exposes the obscenity of modern communication. The loss of private space, the estrangement from the real and the instantaneity of information have transformed man from the player on a stage to a mere screen reflecting different networks. He describes this issue as pathos of communication and explains it as a "nonreflecting surface" or a "passive screen" where people no longer reflect or "project" all of their psychological dimensions with all its jealousies, envies, fantasies, desires, loss, mourning, fear, and frustration in their interactions.

force that plays a crucial role in consumerist capitalism.¹ The intrusion of advertising discourses hardly leaves room for a personal space, in the figurative or literal sense. Its instantaneity invades the physical extent as well as the introspective one, paralyzing the postmodern human from “reflecting” his intelligible capacities and exercising his free will to choose, purchase, or refrain from doing so.

The “overexposure” to trivial commodities, as Baudrillard explains it, reduces humans to robotic and senseless objects. The narrator in *Fight Club* explains the huge influence IKEA has on people’s lives and states:

And I wasn't the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue.
We all have the same Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern. Mine fell fifteen stories, burning, into a fountain.
We all have the same Rislampa/Har paper lamps made from wire and environmentally friendly unbleached paper. Mine are confetti.
(Palahniuk 23)

With a clear reference of the simulacrum of sex, whereby masturbation replaces a ‘real’ physical and intimate contact, the “overexposure” to unauthenticated commodities has trapped the narrator in a sterile space. The estrangement from reality he suffers from is intensified by the invasion of his private space. His home, the representation of his safe shelter, is invaded by a conglomerate company that eradicates even people’s most intimate sexual habits. Kyle Bishop, from Utah University, confirms: “The parallel between consumerism and masturbation is clear. Rather than filling a personal void with sexual satisfaction, the modern yuppie turns to the latest and trendiest of catalogs. Shopping has replaced sexual stimulation as the preferred form of self-gratification” (Bishop 46). Thus, the narrator’s basic needs of shelter and sex are no longer a personal or a creative experience in his life; rather, they are part of the postmodern maze of trivialities.

¹ Baudrillard provides other writings on advertisement and consumerism. Students could also check his book entitled *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (1998).

The cult of consumption affects the narrator's mental state and causes the disintegration of his consciousness, which is manifested in the psychological disorder of schizophrenia.¹ In relation to consumerist capitalism, schizophrenia is best explained in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972). The French philosopher and his psychotherapist counterpart provide a metaphorical sense for schizophrenia; they state: "Schizophrenia is like love: there is no specifically schizophrenic phenomenon or entity; schizophrenia is the universe of productive and reproductive desiring machines, universal primary production as the essential reality of man and nature" (Deleuze & Guattari 16). This is meant to establish a realistic description of the schizophrenic as a "universal producer" within the cycles of Mother Nature, strengthening his image as a "*Homo natura*." They confirm, however, that their explanation does not attempt to "make nature one of the poles of schizophrenia" (Deleuze & Guattari 16). The schizophrenic experience remains, according to them, a "process of production" and not an aspect of nature.

Deleuze and Guattari define Schizophrenia as an extreme mental condition which coexists within the forces of capitalism. This particular system invokes neurosis tendencies² in an attempt to maintain the norms of social and behavioral conduct. Since capitalism reduces human relations and sensibilities to monetary interests, Deleuze and Guattari believe that most psychological disorders are sourced in economic conflicts, a diagnosis already provided by Sigmund Freud (Deleuze & Guattari 15). They undoubtedly reaffirm Baudrillard's process of simulacra in regards to the consumption cycle; they regroup all human actions, emotions, sensibilities, pains and passions under the sequence of production, in a

¹ Schizophrenia is often defined as a mental illness characterized by an overall confusion about the perception of reality. Its clinical symptoms may include abnormal behavior, false beliefs, unclear or confused thinking, reduced social engagement and emotional expression. People with schizophrenia often have related additional mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. It is considered one of the most ambiguous diseases of the human psyche as its symptoms never completely resolve. The condition of schizophrenia is studied in relation to capitalism in this chapter. It will be analyzed under a psychological approach in the following one. For further information on this condition, students could consult the scientific article titled "Schizophrenia" by René S. Kahn et al.

² Neurosis is defined as a mental disorder that describes severe anxiety and involves irrational and drastic reactions to stressful situations. It was studied as a separate disorder in the eighteenth century, mainly by Dr. Sigmund Freud; however, it is now included as a clinical symptom of anxiety disorder. For further inquiries on the subject of neurosis, students could check Ayla Michelle Demir's article "Clinical Applications of Psychoanalysis to the Clinical Structure of Neurosis."

sense that they are immediately followed by an act of consumption which creates an “endless cycle” of “re-production.”

The narrator attempts to reconnect with his human side by attending all men support groups for testicular cancer. The “endless cycle of re-production” causes a stiffness of social and intimate interactions, and withholds him from “reflecting” and “projecting” his feelings. On what clearly is a desperate thirst for love and belongingness, the narrator provides fake testimonies and shares the group’s therapeutic crying in which he throws himself in the arms of Bob, a cancer patient, and succumbs to his tears:

I've been coming here every week for two years, and every week Bob wraps his arms around me, and I cry.
"You cry," Bob says and inhales and sob, sob, sobs. "Go on now and cry."
The big wet face settles down on top of my head, and I am lost inside. This is when I'd cry. 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. (Palahniuk 04)

Bob’s physical contact provides a safe space to release the deep feelings of loneliness and the overwhelming sense of despair the narrator experiences daily. As he varies his fake testimonies from one support group to another, this illusion alleviates his distress, pain and anxiety, and allows him to momentarily cure his insomnia. Evidently, this temporary relief would fail and the consumption cycle, along with its devastating effects, would reclaim its position in his life. His tormented consciousness would capitulate to give birth to Tyler, his last hope of breaking free.

The consumption cycle acts as an emotional substitution of authentic emotions and eventually causes the disintegration of the narrator’s consciousness. The simulation of “re-production” in regards to the “wasteful expenditures” pushes him to the edge of insanity and gradually takes the reigns over the perception of his own existence. The dichotomies between him and his alter ego Tyler are discerned through their approach to material acquisition. As the narrator defines himself through his commodities, Tyler defies him by separating the material from the existential and eventually creates a manifesto

which yells: “We want you, not your money... As long as you're at fight club, you're not how much money you've got in the bank. You're not your job” (Palahniuk 92). This symbolizes a scream from the narrator’s consciousness which fantasizes about the reestablishment of a humanistic nest where he could break the chains of consumerist slavery and reconnect with his authenticity, sensibilities, emotions, pains and passions.

Veblen’s insights on “conspicuous consumption” involve the new trend of medical enhancements – pharmaceutical or surgical – that are progressively becoming part of the postmodern condition. Products such as Viagra, Botulinum Toxin (Botox), collagen, liposuction and Prozac are part of today’s reality, constituting by that the ‘new normal.’ Ironically, in a constant search for authenticity and sense of identity through physical distinctiveness, the consumer of such trivialities is left with inauthentic expressions and experiences.¹ In a desperate attempt to reverse the aging process, these procedures are considered as a “wasteful commodity” in an “output” of inventions in the medical field. The risks for unnecessary cosmetic surgeries, rendering the body a depot for plastic toxins, seem to crystallize Veblen’s prophecy of “conspicuous consumption.”

Fight Club mocks the lack of authenticity by attacking the field of liposuction plastic surgeries. Tyler basically “recycles” people by hunting down left-over drained human fat from clinics to produce his soap bars. Marla receives collagen extracted from her mother to build a “collagen trust fund” which she uses to inject her wrinkles and resist the natural course of aging. Hence, collagen is turned into an extravagant commodity, used to achieve the “perfect” physical appearance. In a process he calls “Saponification,” Tyler steals Marla’s collagen to have his final product of hardened soap. He uses human waste of an industry based on self-image enhancement to supply a product meant to cleanse the individual. By “recycling” people, the “wasteful commodities” are turned into useful objects destined for body cleaning. This process symbolizes Tyler’s

¹ For further readings on consumerism in relation to authentic experiences, students could check “American Self-Enhancement Culture and the Cyborg Consumer: Consumer Identity Construction Beyond the Dominance of Authenticity” by Markus Giesler and Marius K. Luedicke

ambition to purify society from its superficial trivialities using unorthodox methods.

Defining self-worth through wealth is not a theme particular to popular culture. The canonized culture, with a particular emphasis on modernism at the turn of the twentieth century, depicts the effects of capitalism on social value and position, best described in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925).¹ Far from ignoring the fact that Jay Gatsby is a criminal with a shady record, he is, nonetheless, a victim of a commodity culture in which emotions and principles are exchanged for economic value. While his American Dream is personified through his true love "Daisy," it is elevated to seek her social ranking of "blue blood." This position, Gatsby believes, is achievable through financial fame; he thus desperately portrays himself through his commodities like his big mansion or speedy car. This illusion is shattered as he finally realizes that material success is not the key factor to achieve such social esteem.

While Gatsby relies on his realistic friend, Nick, to help him crystallize his dream, the narrator in *Fight Club* seeks his nihilistic alter ego to destroy the conformability of his. Suzanne Del Gizzo, an Associate Professor at Chestnut Hill College, writes: "By the end of the twentieth century, when Chuck Palahniuk wrote *Fight Club*, America had moved beyond the fledgling stages of commodity culture and into the ironies and challenges of late capitalism" (Gizzo 70). The exchange of commodity for social value develops into a cult of consumerism in exchange for inner peace and comfort. As both are victims to an ever growing monster, Gatsby dies while the narrator dies from within, and the dream of the first turns into the second's most frightening nightmares.

The lack of authenticity and the criticism it engenders are part of a universal theme in literature as well. A similar approach of disdain towards capitalism and its deteriorating effects on subjectivity is part of *Individutopia* (2018), a

¹ In an interview with journalist Christian Holub, Palahniuk confesses to his intentions in writing *Fight Club* as a continuation of *The Great Gatsby*. He states: "I wondered, what would *The Great Gatsby* be like 10 years later? I wanted to revisit the same characters 10 years later to see them making the same mistakes, assuming the same kind of social roles, and becoming the same failures they condemned their parents for being."

dystopian novel by British “Orwell-esque” author Joss Sheldon. Set in the year 2084, this work presents a terrifying neoliberal future where society becomes plagued by depression, anxiety and suicide, due to the hyper industrialization and commercialization of all life elements, including oxygen, personal reflections and motivations. People are enclosed in their avatars which reinstate human company – including emotional and sexual interactions – through cybernetic programs. *Individutopia* depicts a society so immersed in the ideology of individualism that the social contract no longer exists, leaving these individuals secluded in fierce competitive battles to lead their egocentric lives in a highly capitalist market. This particular novel is the perfect exemplification of a world supremely ruled by the *Homo economicus*.

The protagonist of *Individutopia* – Renee Ann Blanca – could be considered the progeny of the narrator in *Fight Club*. Renee uses Botox injection, inhales minimal quantities of food and competes with everyone else to achieve an authentic look. Like the narrator, her dissatisfaction encourages her to break free and retrieve the nest of human company. The consumption cycle is further elevated as “everything is produced by machines, automated by computers and transported by drones” (Sheldon 32). This makes Renee’s immersion in consumerism even more damaging and harmful to her psychological process. As IKEA simulates the concept of “home” as “the most important place in the world” (Sheldon 35), her attempts to liberate herself and find a true form of authenticity are more challenging than the narrator’s.

This warning against the state of servitude – in which capitalism is forcing its subjects into – is part of a general expression of popular culture. In a vandalistic, yet inspirational, expression of art, Banksy,¹ an anonymous British street artist, ornaments with his thoughts the streets of different parts of the world. As the new face of street art, he uses dark humor, satire and irony to express his political opinions and present his diagnosis of social and cultural

¹ Banksy is often accused of being a vandal with no intellectual meaning or style. The fact remains, however, that his artistic innovations and ambiguous character are defining popular culture in the field of street art, making him one of the main cultural icons in postmodern popular culture. Students interested in street art as an innovative expression of art should consult his book *Wall and Peace* (2005).

postmodern conditions. His genius resides in condensing, through a drawing or a tag, the colossal effects of capitalism. In one of his murals, he sketches: “We can’t do anything to change the world until capitalism crumbles. In the meantime we should all go shopping to console ourselves” (Banksy, *Wall and Peace* 50). Using the street as his medium, Banksy is able to delegitimize the discourse of capitalism and expose it as sedative opium for the condition of postmodern disillusionment. According to him, the obliteration of spirits is more lethal than the decay of the physiological entity. The narrator of *Fight Club* fits Banksy’s satirical tag as his consumerist habits force him to experience the most pernicious forms of death.

Death in relation to capitalism accompanies the narrator and becomes his new “real.” The nature of his work dehumanizes and quantifies the experience of death and the effects of sedative consumerism causes an inner decay to both his spirit and consciousness. Consumerist capitalism torments the narrator and alters his function from an active agent enacting a freedom of choice to a submissive slave obeying an overpowering master. Professor of Sociology Omar Lizardo sees *Fight Club* as “a poignant allegory of the cultural and social contradictions brought about by the capitalist socio-economic system in late modernity” (Lizardo 222). *Fight Club* symbolizes the extent of mental and physical damage a capitalist society could cause; as a result, violence is used as a release mechanism to break the enslaving chains of postmodern slavery.

The damage of “soulless” capitalism seems to be the engraved spirit of postmodern condition. The free system of unrestrained market has turned into a multi-corporate beast that ties its ropes of advertisement, consumerism and invading conglomerates around the necks of its slaves. As freedom has regressed into a state of servitude, American capitalism has turned from a gospel of wealth to a gospel of death. The path of wealth acquisition has been tainted with horrendous crimes only to reach spiritual stagnation and sterility. In all cases, death becomes synonymous to capitalism, either by murdering a fellow human in the greedy quest for more money or by burying human sensibility, authenticity and subjective experiences.

American capitalism implies the “disappearance, death or disintegration of the weak,” which is why it had to be justified, or “legitimized” under different logics than evolutionary dynamics (Salles-Djelic 61). Evidently, such raw realities must fit within the American discourse of perfectibility and exceptionalism. The irregularities of capitalism must be molded under cultural justifications to abide by the infinite number of American myths that glorify the nation’s mission in the world. This process had to be “Americanized” under cultural and universal justifications, including the American Dream of success, the pursuit of happiness or, as detailed in the following section, the Manifest Destiny.

III. Destiny and the Discourse of “Legitimation”

This section investigates the survival of the Manifest Destiny beyond its original expansionist aim of the nineteenth century. As a concept that has stood the test of time, the Manifest Destiny still shapes the American spirit through its discourses which still circulate within the interplay of power and resistance. Its uniqueness resides in the multitude of the narratives (or metanarratives) which distinguish it from other American cultural myths. From the Expansionist Era to postmodernism, the discourse of virtuous destiny has in itself been used as a metanarrative to legitimize the practices of capitalism. While *The Godfather* expresses a willingness to simultaneously expose and reinforce these discourses, *Fight Club* aims to banish and demolish them.

1. The Corleone Destiny: Legitimizing Business

According to Lyotard, metanarratives allow the society “in which they are told” to define “its criteria of competence” and to evaluate – according to those criteria – the appropriate set of performances. The end results of these narratives – as enacted by the protagonist – bestow legitimacy upon social institutions. Moreover, a common pattern of “denotative statements” is depicted in these narratives that provide “unified viewpoints.” Lyotard confirms that the core knowledge – including all forms of “*savoir-faire, savoir-vivre, savoir-écouter*” – transmitted through these narratives is “the set of pragmatic rules that constitutes the social bond” (Lyotard 49).

Among the identifiable American cultural concepts in Puzo's *The Godfather* is the Manifest Destiny which infiltrates the plot to function as a personal manifesto for success and glory and as a unifying narrative that bestows legitimacy upon the capitalist institution. The concept of 'destiny' becomes an "optimistic evolution" for the characters of the novel as it provides an opportunity for progress, personal fulfillment and financial success. More importantly, it communicates a more 'truthful' experience by exposing its vicious capitalist frontage. The Manifest Destiny is encapsulated in securing the wealth and power of the family; therefore, for the Corleone family, shielding the family business provides a discourse of "legitimation" to practice the American capitalist agenda with its realistic "criminal" practices.

One of the most reoccurring maxims in the novel is preached repeatedly by Don Vito Corleone: "every man has one destiny." This "denotative statement" unifies the Corleone male members as they all manifest their destiny with money and murder. Starting with the Don himself, his destiny begins when he encounters the first danger in America. After a distraught childhood experience, Vito leads a quiet lifestyle with his Sicilian wife and his two sons until one street extorter named Fanucci disrupts his peaceful life. His multiple extortions of Abbandando's grocery store get Vito fired from his job and leave him and his family in a financial crisis. To make two ends meet, Vito, "against his better judgment," contributes to a small illicit side business with his friends Clemenza and Tessio only to have Fanucci reappear to ask for his share of the benefits. Vito is then forced to embark upon his destiny:

It was from this experience came his oft-repeated belief that every man has but one destiny. On that night he could have paid Fanucci the tribute and have become again a grocery clerk with perhaps his own grocery store in the years to come. But destiny had decided that he was to become a Don and had brought Fanucci to him to set him on his destined path. (Puzo 169)

Vito is forced to kill Fanucci to free himself and his neighborhood from his tyranny, marking by that his first step into becoming Don Corleone, the people's godfather. This murder presents him with an opportunity to establish himself as the protector of his friends and eventually makes him gain the position of leader of the underworld as head of the five mafia families in New York.

Puzo attempts to legitimize this destiny by encrusting his rhetoric with American proclaimed ideals. He first forges young Vito with American thoughts and reflections about rights, success and progress. Vito learns how to defend his alienable rights, not out of fear, but out of "common sense." The murder of Fanucci is, for him, a reasonable and heroic act since "Surely the world could do without such a person" (Puzo 171). Seen from an American perspective, Vito's Manifest Destiny starts as an opposition to oppression and terrorization. He also attains the self-control required for surviving a hostile society; Vito "never uttered a threat. He always used logic that proved to be irresistible. He always made certain that the other fellow got his share of profit. Nobody lost" (Puzo 180). The essence of his actions convinces him of the chastity of his empire and he asserts, that "After all, we're not murders" (Puzo 23). Thus, the American proclaimed ideals of alienable rights, justice, common sense and reason are engraved in Vito's character that helps legitimize his destiny of crime.

Puzo depicts the Corleone state of affairs as an American corporation by using symbolism at the heart of a criminal organization. In the summit meeting between the Dons of the underworld, Don Corleone delivers an outstanding speech that "reaffirmed his position as the most far-seeing statesman among them, so full of common sense" (Puzo 246). The meeting is held in a banking institution, under the eyes of Alexander Hamilton's portrait. Tom Hagen, the family consigliere, believes that Hamilton "might have approved of this peace meeting" (Puzo 235). Leading the American Treasury Department established in 1789, Alexander Hamilton was an American statesman, politician, economist and one of America's Founding Fathers who designed the financial frames of the Republic. His portrait, watching over the meeting, legitimizes its members as pragmatic capitalists who work hard to build their nation (Messenger 200).

Puzo's particular choice of Hamilton is very precise if indeed intentional. In fact, Hamilton believed that only a small class of old families of ship owners and financiers should be placed as the government's allies. He had a vision of bringing financial order by giving the power only to the few wisest people, hoping for a 'class' of governing elites (Messenger 200). Such profile describes the power of the underworld families through which they hold immense control over the American society. Messenger elaborates on this point by stating, "Vito Corleone would be the immigrant Hamilton would most fear, but he would admire his financial and organizational acumen" (Messenger 202). Puzo sets the Don as a Founding Father in terms of wisdom, statesmanship and financial capacity; as "a man with vision," his enterprise is envisioned according to the American discourse of a capitalist Manifest Destiny.

Puzo legitimizes the Corleone business by portraying the Don as a model of a self-made man.¹ Throughout the novel, he is referred to as a "businessman," providing for his family and close friends during the country's hard times. By the time Michael is groomed to take power, he defends his father by saying:

My father is a businessman trying to provide for his wife and children and those friends he might need someday in a time of trouble. He doesn't accept the rules of the society we live in because those rules would have condemned him to a life not suitable to a man like himself, a man of extraordinary force and character. What you have to understand is that he considers himself the equal of all those great men like Presidents and Prime Ministers and Supreme Court Justices and Governors of the States. He refuses to live by rules set up by others, rules which condemn him to a defeated life. But his ultimate aim is to enter that society with a certain power since society doesn't really protect its members who do not have their own individual power. In the meantime he operates on a code of ethics he considers far superior to the legal structures of society. (Puzo 308)

¹ The myth of the self-made man is one of the founding myths that became intertwined with America's historical fabric since the birth of the nation. In its general meaning, the myth of the self-made man refers to pragmatic individualism and success that typically characterized the American spirit (Paul 368). This myth was concretized by figures like Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) who emphasized ethical hard work, education, morality and self-discipline. Nevertheless, when corporate America and its capitalist market started to develop, the aspect of "self-interest that aims at the sheer accumulation of property, recognition, prestige, and personal gain without any concern for others" (Paul 389) became prominent within the structure of the myth. Accordingly, the Corleone family presents this realistic frontage of the self-made man with its practices of late capitalism policies in the American society.

The Don is considered as a responsible man, supporting his family as his duty entails, and helping others in exchange of services. More importantly, his power is amplified in the face of rejection to equal the potency of great American men. He rules the underworld as a firm president; he ensures supreme justice for those deprived of it as a fair judge, and he protects the sanctity of territories among the five families as governors do. His relationship with society echoes the Emersonian principle¹ which warns that “society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members” (Emerson 103). The Don does not conform to a society that diminishes his “extraordinary force and character,” and endeavors to preserve the “integrity of [his] own mind” (Emerson 104).

Lyotard confirms that “A *self* does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations” (Lyotard 42). The Don is matured in an American historical frame. He is part of the cultural mold he grew up in, and is, therefore, legitimized as an American self-made man. His attitude exemplifies Lyotard’s definition of knowledge which encapsulates the technical qualifications, ethical wisdom and personal sensibility; these criteria allow him to transmit the narrative of the Manifest Destiny within his “social bond.” Messenger confirms: “It’s the rendering of the Don as a statesman in a quite self-conscious historical frame that gives Puzo the opportunity to legitimate Vito Corleone’s vision and Americanness” (Messenger 193). Vito Corleone is the Founding Father of his own America, or as Messenger calls him “Godfather America.”

By the time Michael accepts his role as the next Don and the protector of the Corleone business, his destiny is double-sided and is, therefore, legitimized from within and from without. In the first version of his destiny, he follows the footsteps of his father in securing the power and capitalist endeavors of the family through crime and becomes a much more ruthless leader. This joins the

¹ In his essay entitled “Self-Reliance” (1841), Ralph Waldo Emerson believes that Society is in conspiracy against all members who respond only to the integrity of their own minds and not to the conformism it establishes. Society is a state where members thrive to secure their social position at the expense of their own liberty. This organization refutes realities, oppresses creators and prefers the comfortableness of its own customs. According to Emerson, a man could truly be free only when he does not submit, in any case, to the will of society.

general discourse of the Manifest Destiny which requires more advanced and globalized use of brutality; stipulating that the postmodern condition aggravates the state of violence in a progressive eventuality of capitalism. Evidently, this destiny is often legitimized by the same “common sense” attitude that justifies Vito’s crimes under a set of enforced and unfortunate circumstances that draw both father and son to the depths of the underworld.

The other side of Michael’s destiny emanates from within an idealistic vision. The new Don endeavors to legitimize the Corleone Empire by cleansing the murderous tails that ensure its capitalist success: “If everything goes right, the Corleone Family will be completely legitimate in about five years” (Puzo 306). This destiny represents a long-desired dream which he personally fails to accomplish; however, he sacrifices himself to the world of crime so that his children can “grow in a different world. They would be doctors, artists, scientists. Governors. Presidents. Anything at all” (Puzo 348). Evidently, this destiny is legitimized by his willingness to sacrifice his ‘pure’ American Dream and perpetuate it to the next generation; as Combs states, “In the meantime, as a sanguinary authority, if he has to blackmail a senator, intimidate witnesses, conduct vendettas against rivals...that is simply the price of good business” (Combs 90). The last time we encounter Michael in the novel is through his wife Kay. The Corleone assets in New York are sold, and the whole family moves to Nevada. Kay admits that Michael “lived a normal life. He owned a construction business; he joined the businessmen’s clubs and civic committees; he had a healthy interest in local politics without interfering publically. It was a good life” (Puzo 562). Michael’s “good business” has the ultimate purpose of ensuring the accomplishment of his new Manifest Destiny, by moving to the far southwest of the United States, a destiny worthy of a frontier antihero.¹

Messenger confirms: “Vito and Michael are... fantasy figures who embody American hopes and economic dreams” (Messenger 13). Puzo creates a mob narrative that reinforces the discourse of the Manifest Destiny, emphasizing its persistence from one generation to another. The genius of Puzo begins with his

¹ This particular point will be further developed in Chapter Four.

opening quote of *The Godfather*: “*Behind every great fortune there is a crime*”- Balzac. His quote opens a multitude of interpretations. The obvious one would be the reference to the mafia institution and its history of crime and success. A less obvious interpretation would link this quote to the American Manifest Destiny, with crime and violence at the core of its capitalist success.

In his famous essay “Crime as an American Way of Life,” Daniel Bell¹ travels back in American history to foresee the future of the American society in relation to crime and capitalism. He reveals the “ruthless business enterprise” which many successful Americans maintained to accumulate their wealth:

Yet, after all, the foundation of many a distinguished older American fortune was laid by sharp practices and morally reprehensible methods. The pioneers of American capitalism were not graduated from Harvard's School of Business Administration. The early settlers and founding fathers, as well as those who "won the West" and built up cattle, mining, and other fortunes, often did so by shady speculations and a not inconsiderable amount of violence. They ignored, circumvented, or stretched the law when it stood in the way of America's destiny, and their own - or were themselves the law when it served their purposes. This has not prevented them and their descendants from feeling proper moral outrage when under the changed circumstances of the crowded urban environments later comers pursued equally ruthless tactics. (Bell 128)

Bell asserts that the American “destiny” is manifested through the accumulation of wealth to secure the path of material success. From the first early settlers to the tycoons of corporate capitalism, they all bended or created their own laws according to their interests which often entailed several practices of “ruthless” crimes. Following this tradition, Puzo positions the Corleone business creed within the same American “destiny.” The real fortune Don Corleone and his son Michael create could not have been achieved without an enterprise of crime. Every step in their journey, from securing their basic needs to structuring their

¹ For further readings on capitalism and its relation to the American society and history, students could visit Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1978). Bell analyzed the “downfall” of Western liberal capitalist societies due to the excessive culture of “personal gratification.” The dynamics of capitalism, according to him, was characterized by its “boundlessness” and its unlimited “exponential growth.” By the middle of the nineteenth century, the economic impulse was changing the cultural trajectory in an immensely noticeable way; this reflected the practices of capitalism and drastically influenced and changed the socioeconomic conditions.

multifunctional empire, requires an unlawful act. All the ties they build to become stronger as businessmen usually and eventually call for an illegitimate recognition of power and an illegal retribution of service.

The Godfather presents a realistic picture of what the Manifest Destiny truly stands for: a legitimized violent path distinguished by the desire to secure capital interest, accumulate wealth and preserve power, as cultural theorist Mark Fisher explains it best:

The affinity between hip hop and gangster movies such as *Scarface*, *The Godfather* films, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Goodfellas* and *Pulp Fiction* arises from their common claim to have stripped the world of sentimental illusions and seen it for 'what it really is': a Hobbesian war of all against all, a system of perpetual exploitation and generalized criminality (Fisher 17).

The illusion of American virtuous missions erodes under *The Godfather's* exposed reality. This should not be understood, however, as the end of American metanarratives attempting to legitimize its capital practices. Though the novel joins the movement of resistance to the established cultural discourses, the Americanized version of a virtuous destiny is still a common tale. It is maintained in fictional or biographical personal experiences like Chris Gardner's *The Pursuit of Happyness*¹ (2006).

Directed by Gabriele Muccino, *The Pursuit of Happyness* is a biographical drama movie adaptation of Gardner's best-selling memoir, starring Will Smith and his son Jaden Smith. The movie tells the true story of a homeless father who cares for his toddler son in the streets of San Francisco, moving among shelters, motels, soup lines and public restroom of subway stations. At the age of twenty and just out of the Navy, Chris abandons his promising career in medicine to enter the competitive world of finance to pursue his dream of becoming a Wall Street stockbroker. An unfortunate mistake, however, causes him the collapse of

¹ The unusual spelling of the word "Happyness" of the memoir/movie title is derived from a mural painted on the wall of the daycare Gardner's son attended. A similar process is seen in Ayi Kwei Armah's novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) in which the word "beautiful" is taken from an inscription on a bus in one of Ghana's poorest streets. The intentional misspelling in both books emphasizes the euphoric sense of the words "happy" and "beauty" while portraying the disappointment and disillusionment of the crude experience in reality.

his entire world. Chris invests his entire life savings in portable bone density scanners which he pitches to doctors around town as slightly better inventions than X-rays. This investment fails to engender an important profit and to meet the demands of his already distressed wife Linda, who ends up leaving him with their son to pursue a new life. He meets Jay Twistle whom he impresses with his mathematical skills during a taxi ride. Chris applies for an internship at Jay's firm and ends up obtaining a full time position there. The epilogue by the end of the movie reveals that he succeeds in forming his own brokerage firm.

Gardner's story is a classic "rags-to-riches" saga, reflecting a hopeful, hard working and honest man who cares for his son no matter the circumstances. This conjures the spirit of Horatio Alger's heroes who rise from poverty to prosperity while preserving their high ethical code. It also appeals to the essence of the American Dream which promises and guarantees moral and financial stability after hard work. More importantly, Gardner's story reflects the 'innocent' path dearly emphasized by the American discourse. Unlike Michael, Gardner's Manifest Destiny is attained through preserving his moral grounds and perseverance of character, traits supposedly inherited from his ancestors.

Though the spirit of materialism is still essentially relevant, the master narrative of the Manifest Destiny is exposed differently in *Fight Club*. The millennial world imposes new vehicles of power that transmit and perpetuate different elements to this discourse. The narrator indulges in a consumerist cycle to fill the emotional void he is confronted with. Evidently, his life is portrayed by the author as having no essential meaning and devoid of any significant purpose.

2. The Durden Mission: Restoring the Subjective Experience

According to Lyotard, knowledge, in a postmodern context, does not find its validity within itself or by providing unifying meanings to the "social bond;" rather, it finds it in the practical subject of humanity (Lyotard 62). The focus has shifted towards the "self-grounding of freedom" that would eventually allow the self a full emancipation from "everything that prevents it from governing itself" (Lyotard 62). Evidently, the process of "legitimation" of narratives is formulated in different terms. Lyotard confirms that metanarratives have lost their

“credibility,” regardless of their “unification” strategies or their speculative nature.

The fact remains that both capitalist prosperity and technological advancement generated a process of “delegitimation” and imposed an attitude of “nihilism” towards metanarratives (Lyotard 65). Lyotard asserts that the decline of narrative “legitimation” can be seen as an effect of the “blossoming of techniques and technologies” that started by the end of the Second World War – when liberal capitalism was revived and individual enjoyment was valorized again – and matured by the end of the twentieth century (Lyotard 64).

Unlike the narrative of *The Godfather* which exposes the “incredulity” of “legitimation,” *Fight Club* does not center the validity of its narrative on uncovering the dark path of the Manifest Destiny. As this discourse has been exhausted and accepted in millennial popular culture, *Fight Club* derails its prospects towards the “subject.” The emancipation mission is specifically designed by Tyler to free the human being from all forms of controlling forces. The “delegitimation” of the Manifest Destiny as a capitalist discourse is achieved through a “nihilistic” philosophy of destruction. Ultimately, Tyler endeavors to alter the materialistic character of this discourse to a personal one. In other words, freeing people from the chains of postmodern slavery, fighting the condition of consumerist capitalism and reevaluating the self by reestablishing an authentic and subjective experience would, for Tyler, constitute the new discourse of the Manifest Destiny.

One of the effects of Veblen’s “conspicuous consumption” is to opiate life experiences, alienating the human being from his own capacities and sensibilities; hence, any form of useful knowledge. In *Fight Club*, the subjective experience the Manifest Destiny usually requires is denied by different forms of disassociation such as the over-production of commodities. Indeed, from personal requirements such as basic needs to luxurious extravagances such as designed furniture, commodities are predisposed without the subjective experience of hard work. Thus, the narrator suffers from a lack of life purpose he could look forward to.

The narrator's alter ego launches his war against the commodity-driven society which constitutes the personal journey towards his Manifest Destiny. As Tyler embodies the spirit of resistance in *Fight Club*, he provides the narrator with a vision to fight for and a purpose to work towards. Unlike Michael who sacrifices himself to ensure the continuity of his father's destiny, Tyler defies the notion of continuity by manifesting his own destiny of destruction. He rebels against the social, cultural and impersonal forces that foster pathological and senseless individuals. "Maybe self-improvement isn't the answer... Maybe self-destruction is the answer" (Palahniuk 26). This is the motto of Tyler's philosophy and his way of healing the world from its postmodern syndrome of failure. Like Michael's destiny, Tyler's mission is two folds; destroying the narrator and the consumerist society from within.

The narrator's basic need of a safe shelter becomes his source of addiction to desensitize him from postmodern artificial reality. His house grows into a hoard of wasteful materials. Veblen describes this expenditure by stating, "the conspicuously wasteful honorific expenditure that confers spiritual well-being may become more indispensable than much of that expenditure which ministers to the "lower" wants of physical well-being or sustenance only" (Veblen 70). The useless materials would provide an "indispensable" well-being which extends beyond the physiological necessity. The narrator suffers from a deep attachment to his possessions, especially his condominium and his furniture. He spends most of his savings on excessively ornamenting his house and most of his time on praising it:

I loved my life. I loved that condo.
I loved every stick of furniture
That was my whole life. Everything, the lamps, the chairs, the rugs
were me.
The dishes in the cabinets were me.
The plants were me.
The television was me. (Palahniuk 68)

The narrator defines himself through the consumption of objects and projects his identity in the soulless commodities he purchases for his house.¹ Veblen confirms that the process of purchasing “wasteful expenditure” is a result of a response to a “stimuli.” Evidently, the narrator is constantly and intensively subject to an “overexposure” of advertisement schemes and capitalist agendas.² Yet, the most effective stimuli seems to be the constant sterility of emotions which triggers his purchasing needs as a compensation mechanism. The narrator’s home provides him with a sense of security and psychological comfort.

Tyler’s philosophy of destruction entails that the demolition of senseless commodities leaves room for the propulsion of feelings and emotions that accompany the subjective experience. To that end, each time the narrator speaks or recalls his condo; Tyler is summoned – by his own subconscious – to repeat slogans about destruction:

"Disaster is a natural part of my evolution," Tyler whispered, "toward tragedy and dissolution."

I told the detective that it was the refrigerator that blew up my condo.

'I'm breaking my attachment to physical power and possessions,'

Tyler whispered, "because only through destroying myself can I discover the greater power of my spirit." (Palahniuk 68)

Tyler eventually destroys the narrator’s condo with homemade explosives. His mission is to save him from his state of slavery by taking him out of his comfort zone; he, then, makes him move in with him in an abandoned building with no luxurious commodities. His ultimate purpose is to free the spirit which is buried among the trivialities of postmodern hyperreality. Thus, whatever the narrator uses to fill his emotional void, Tyler is determined to demolish it in order to liberate him from the chains of postmodern slavery.

¹ For further readings on consumption and identity construction, students could consult Robert Bocoock’s book *Consumption* (1993). The author relies on the contribution of leading writers in the field, including Veblen, Marx, Gramsci and Baudrillard to examine the role of consumption in Western societies. Bocoock provides a critical overview on consumption as a socio-cultural process to the ideology of consumerism.

² For further readings on the effects of advertisement, students could check Tandy D. Chalmers and Linda L. Price’s “Perceptions of Authenticity in Advertisements: Negotiating the Inauthentic” (2009).

Tyler establishes his fight club as a secured nest that provides an awakening “feeling of embodiment” and a site for resistance to the process of dehumanization. Fight club represents a safe space where men could participate in an authentic subjective experience through physical massacre. The narrator indulges in the spirit of the club, and soon enough, he thirsts for destruction:

There's a sleeper hold that gives somebody just enough air to stay awake, and that night at fight club I hit our first-timer and hammered that beautiful mister angel face, first with the bony knuckles of my fist like a pounding molar, and then the knotted tight butt of my fist after my knuckles were raw from his teeth stuck through his lips (Palahniuk 78).

Compared to the support groups that the narrator used to attend, it is much more effective as it allows him to actualize his emotionally unbearable pain into a physically inciting pain. The full-scale violence sets the narrator free from the enslaving chains of home and body idealization; he is now utterly destroyed.

The destruction of human bodies is also symbolically attached to abolishing the idea behind the perfectibility of appearance. The men in Tyler's fight club represent the middle class white collar workers who stew in inauthentic dead-end jobs with no fulfillment of their personal potentials, as researcher Coşkun Liktör confirms:

According to Tyler, the fight club is the last refuge for men whose physical, creative and intellectual potential is drastically wasted in the late capitalist consumer society where people are forced into slavish work routines and blinded with the false promise of the American Dream, brainwashed into believing that they will all be millionaires. (Liktör 381)

The American Dream falls short of promise as it traps generations into a docile work force, tranquilizing them with false illusions of consumerist over-productivity. After awakening the narrator and his fellow men through the physical experience of fight club, Tyler's mission transcends to destroy the consumerist society from within to shed light on the “darkness concealed behind the glittering mask of prosperity, success and glamour that characterize the lives of privileged Americans” (Liktör 382).

Tyler's rebellious spirit is reflected in his fight against the consumerist character of the postmodern world. Throughout the novel, he is portrayed as a free spirited man who endeavors to mend the alienation of the postmodern man and reconnect him to his human sensibilities. The narrator confirms that:

Tyler was making real bucks. Nordstrom's called and left an order for two hundred bars of Tyler's brown sugar facial soap before Christmas. At twenty bucks a bar, suggested retail price, we had money to go out on Saturday night. Money to fix the leak in the gas line. Go dancing. Without money to worry about, maybe I could quit my job. Tyler calls himself the Paper Street Soap Company. People are saying it's the best soap ever. (Palahniuk 50)

Far from the utopian idealist, Tyler is presented as an anarchist who believes in the freedom of capitalism, but not in its fatal chains of postmodern consumerism. As a free entrepreneur, he makes an income out of fabricating, producing and selling soap, gaining a reputation for the good quality of his products.

Additionally, Tyler holds several night jobs as a projectionist at a movie theatre and waitressing at dinner parties. These small labors represent an opportunity to execute his rebellious mission against the conditions of capitalism. To begin with, he uses the movie theatre to slip frames of pornography within the film trailer. The endeavor to reestablish the postmodern man with his sexual nature is among Tyler's first priorities. Moreover, he uses his service at dinner parties to sabotage the rich elite hosts and embarrass them by urinating in their soups and perfume bottles: "Tyler and me, we've turned into the guerrilla terrorists of the service industry. Dinner party saboteurs" (Palahniuk 49). The narrator's metamorphosis begins with these rebellious white collar jobs, providing a thrill that awakens the subjective experience.

Tyler's capitalistic endeavors represent a changing point in his Manifest Destiny. As the novel aims at criticizing the conditions of capitalism, its enacting agents and destructive agendas, it does not suggest another economic system as an alternative. Indeed, Tyler, as a free entrepreneur, is himself an agent and executer of capitalism. He fights the consumerist culture, advertisement, the invasion of conglomerate companies, the imposition of the micro industries and

the banality of the rich controlling classes; nevertheless, he does not negate capitalism as a discourse of free will in free market. He reestablishes self-worth based on humanistic principles but without ultimately negating the materialistic necessity as a basic need.

Tyler does not provide a clear outcome to these anarchist missions. At the beginning of the story, a typical man cries in his closing prayers at the testicular cancer support groups: “Bring us to our destiny. Bring us peace” (Palahniuk 20). The reestablishment of “peace” is found in the restoration of subjective experiences which represent the new postmodern Manifest Destiny. This calling seems to awaken the narrator’s narcissistic alter ego who considers it as a vocation to save humanity from destructive consumerist capitalism. Though according to him, the means to establish peace is chaos and anarchy, he does not necessarily propose an end result based on a concrete and sustainable system. Thus, Tyler’s mission is not to abolish capitalism as an economic system, but to destroy the postmodern condition of capitalism which imposes a state of servitude to consumerism and causes a disconnection with human essence. The Manifest Destiny of the postmodern human is to re-conquer his humanistic horizons and rediscover his sensibilities that allow him to relive authentic and subjective experiences. From this standpoint, it could be safe to consider Tyler’s destiny as, indeed, a virtuous destiny.

Tyler seems to acknowledge and accept capitalist realism.¹ As an attribute to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Zizek, Fisher states that: “It’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (Fisher 7). Fisher insists that capitalism is the only “viable” political and economic system and that it is “now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (Fisher 8- His italics). Capitalism is what remains after the collapse of “ritual or symbolic beliefs” and all that is left is *us*, the “consumer-spectator” (Fisher 10).

¹ Fisher prefers the term “capital realism” to postmodernism to denounce a new attitude of capitalist practices different from that of the 1970s or 1980s, in which capitalism “occupies the horizons of the thinkable.” He argues that capitalism has become part of reality, or reality itself, and has “colonized the dreaming life” of people to the extent that it is no longer worth discussing its effects or its possible abolition in the future (Fisher 15).

Dystopian novels, movies or television series in which the main theme is the awakening of people to lead a revolution and abolish capitalism often leave an open ending for the reader or spectator to draw in his imagination. The dystopian political thriller *V for Vendetta* (2005) by James McTeigue exemplifies the future of capitalism. The plot is derived from the historical conspiracy to blow up the House of Parliament on November 5th, 1605, also known as, the Guy Fawkes Gunpowder Plot. The alternative future is depicted as a regime of totalitarian fascism in which the ruling class represents the capitalist government (the superstructure of the bourgeoisie which controls the means of productions) and the rest of the people as the working class. An anarchist called V (portrayed by Hugo Weaving) attempts to ignite a revolution to free people from the grasp of the capitalist bourgeoisie (Couzens, *A Critical Analysis*).¹

The movie acknowledges that fascism is the openly extended form of capitalism, where even as a futuristic perception alienates people in their search for a new social order. As a dystopian vision, an extremely capitalist world is depicted as a decaying planet, ravaged by plagues and wars and devoid from all notions of democracy. In regards to the open ending, the movie shows thousands of citizens marching towards the House of Parliament, without any formal orders, to destroy the totalitarian regime. The fact remains that, like Tyler, V does not propose an alternative to the revoked system or an effective solution that could solve the deficiencies of capitalism. His destiny as a revolutionary figure is limited to raising awareness and organizing the masses without necessarily establishing a pragmatic order that structures the new society. Since capitalism is “realism itself” (Fisher 10), the alternative is, thus, suspended even at the level of utopian/dystopian vision.

The open ending with no alternative is also mirrored in David Fincher’s cinematographic adaptation of *Fight Club* (1999). The fight against capitalist practices is intensified when an important change in the plot is made by the director. In the novel, Project Mayhem aims at destroying a skyscraper national

¹ This is an e-text; therefore, page number is not available.

museum whose symbolism will further be discussed. In the movie, however, the project is aimed at demolishing a major credit company that keeps intrusive records of financial transactions. Erasing people's credit records could provide a chance for a fresh start by freeing them from their debt capital. The ending portrays the narrator standing with Marla as the credit company building collapses, breaking the chains of capitalism but without envisioning the events of the aftermath. Evidently, this is not an artistic or professional incompetence from McTeigue and Fincher, but rather a fatalistic reality of an irreplaceable system of capitalism.

Like Michael, Tyler finds a purpose to fulfill in new postmodern America. Both antiheroes lead their journeys towards executing their radically different Manifest Destiny, a concept that has survived their time as a metanarrative of self-fulfillment. Michael manifests his destiny by securing, and ideally, legitimizing the family business, asserting by that a more 'truthful' continuum of conventions. For his part, the narrator's thirst for more commodities as a substitution for human intimacy is revoked by a 'blissful' nihilistic alter ego whose mission of restoration of the self is distinguished as an invention in the formula of the Manifest Destiny in popular literature.

IV. The Formula of Virtuous Destiny between Disclosure and Destruction

A more realistic interpretation of capitalism is seen in postmodern literature where authors investigate America's material success and its impact on the social and psychological development of the American mind.¹ To that effect, criticism is diverted towards the enabler of material success in America (capitalism) which is often legitimized by national metanarratives. American novelists are very critical about the source of this success, the means that allow its progress and the

¹ The nineteenth century exteriorized the "materialistic thread" of the American character that started to form within the design of the nation's social and cultural paradigms. Frank Durham, a Professor at the University of Iowa, explains how the insights of Adam Smith became a cornerstone of American economics to the extent where "America [became] a materialistic nation. The dollar is the American's god. To the American, success and failure are measured solely by materialistic criteria" (Durham 92). Moreover, the Gilded Age, with the popularity of its robber barons and business tycoons, perpetuated the glories of material success. Evidently, this economic aspect would affect the American novel and the portrayal of a new kind of hero. Authors like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Theodore Dreiser, and William Faulkner were inspired by America's material success and depicted their protagonists as heroes who are not ashamed to desire and attain this success (Messenger 209).

effects it has on the “American soul.” The development of new schools of criticism, such as deconstructionism and New Historicism, provide a variety of diagnosis cases to the state of capitalism and its organization in America and the rest of the world.

Puzo exposes the state of “soulless” capitalism as an American enterprise of crimes. While some critics believe that *The Godfather* represents the collapse of the American Dream, the narrative seems to reveal a much deeper issue. Messenger confirms that *The Godfather* may be the “very expression of American capitalism with money and murder as constants, with the attendant ironies surrounding the Corleone isolation from or participation in pluralism, the economy, American systems of justice, and politics” (Messenger 7). Puzo threads his narrative on the strings of American capitalism and discloses its dark side in the social, economic and historical fabric of the American system. He sheds light upon the criminalities involved in American economy, justice and politics, and makes of his novel a miniature image on how the American capitalist society truly functions. In his letter to actor Marlon Brando, director Francis Coppola attempts to persuade him to take the part in his second cinematographic adaptation and states that the “Mafia is only a metaphor for America and capitalism” (Campbell, Eutyclus).¹

The narrative depicts the impact of capitalism on the personal and social scale in America as well. The characters preserve their traditional values of family love, ethnic brotherhood and loyalty in the face of American pluralism. While these principles are indeed part of the Italian community in America, the reality is that every action is mapped as a business deal in a give and receive transaction, mirroring by that the creed of American capitalism where monetary benefits become prior to human principles and relationships.

¹ In an online published letter, director Francis Coppola attempts to persuade Marlon Brando to take, for the second time, the leading role of Don Vito Corleone in *The Godfather II* (1974)

The American audience received *The Godfather* as a gospel of the true word. The individual was elevated, not through the ethically and morally bound American hero, but through a dark, mysterious and murderous antihero. Despite his criminal path, he was accepted as the new leading figure in securing a respectable capitalist progress. The American audiences finally understood and appreciated the honesty of Puzo's message, which stipulated a compulsory enterprise of crime to achieve the progress promised by the American Dream of success.

As the ethical ropes were unleashed, by the end of the twentieth century, capitalism prospered in uncontrolled forms. Its crimes turned inwards and were no longer depicted in a conventional sense of struggle for material success. Its effects had a more dangerous toll on the personal scale of the previously elevated individual. Frederic Jameson relates the growth of capitalism in the postmodern era to the cult of consumerism, or what he refers to as "multinational capitalism." He asserts that a new type of consumption is plaguing the social system through the "penetration of advertising, television and the media" (Jameson 11). In addition to other features like the growth of superhighways and the automobile culture, a "radical break" is set between the new postmodern society and whatever preceded it (Jameson 11).

It would seem that the over-excitement of the sixties in achieving success through no moral compass has turned into a nightmarish state of psychological turmoil. *Fight Club* astounded its audiences with the new reality of alienated spirits. The capitalist success of Michael Corleone is no longer desired as it eventually controls the mental and physical state and turns the master into a slave of his own making. Ironically, the thirst for securing material glory so feverishly dominating the narrative of *The Godfather* is shunned as a destructive discourse that dissociates the individual even from "his own existence." The distortion of reality and the fragmentation of the self are due to an unleashed form of capitalism, whose conglomerate institutions keep eroding the authenticity of people and transforming them into docile objects.

The “delegitimization,” to use Lyotard’s term, of American and universal metanarratives is part of the postmodern mission. The means of upholding such practice may vary though, especially in the field of popular culture, from a novel like *The Godfather* which discloses the Manifest Destiny as a bypass for a “soulless” form of capitalism, with crime and murder as its main pillars,¹ to *Fight Club* which aims for its complete destruction in order to reestablish the link between the human and his subjective experience. These attempts to depict and create cultural change represent a pattern of conventions and inventions in literary productions.

Christian Messenger confirms that the freedom to pursue an individual destiny is part of the “elusive and cliché ridden” American discourse. This does not negate, however, the rooted identity with its ethnic backgrounds, family ties and personal principles. The Corleone family, for instance, prioritizes the security of their personal and collective interests while preserving their ethnic unity and taking the law into their own hands. According to Messenger, this represents an extremity of freedom and a “natural abundance” in making one’s destiny (Messenger 50). Indeed, American literature exemplifies many male protagonists who exceed their moral and social limits to pursue their Manifest Destiny from Jay Gatsby to Vito and Michael Corleone.

Destiny unites *The Godfather* with the American cultural system by disclosing and projecting its discourse of virtue to the audience. The Corleone family makes its destiny by building an empire of crime, based on a “soulless” form of capitalism. According to Messenger, the novel’s popular genius is to “turn such violent individual destiny into Manifest Destiny, a familiar American conversion” (Messenger 216). The audience receives Puzo’s work with intense admiration due to the familiarizing cultural elements reflected by the characters. As the concept of ‘destiny’ takes the “highest authority” in the construction of

¹ Stephen Aron, Professor of History at UCLA University, weighs in on the endurance of the Manifest Destiny in postmodern America and concludes that what used to be known as the “Old West” became a “stage on which 1960s critiques of American capitalism and imperialism played out” (Aron, *The History*). Thus, the Manifest Destiny of the antihero would represent a new discourse of scrutiny against the capitalist misconducts that have played– and still continue to do so – a tremendous role in shaping the American cultural experience.

the plot, the audience is adapted to the mind-set of the Corleone family as it attempts to fulfill its destiny in America.

The realistic discourse the Corleones transmit confronts the audience with their own historical and cultural path of legitimized murder for the sake of material progress. Considering authority in a Foucauldian sense of a circulating discourse among established institutions – instead of a political power controlling “from above” – the “questioning of authority” in the sixties was not restricted to the political system; rather, it included all national and cultural paradigms, including founding concepts such as that of the Manifest Destiny. Messenger affirms *The Godfather* as an emblem of the Manifest Destiny with its fundamental components:

The Godfather then casts all images of self-aggrandizement and personal choice under the bar of destiny, from the fated state of being a poor, devastated Sicilian boy to the fate of becoming a Don. Family and Destiny replace community/ country and personal responsibility. All march to several deep chords (Italian, Popular, Melodramatic, American) that blend into one narrative theme that becomes *manifest*. What happened had to happen and did. “Self-evident” takes on the appearance of the most mythic and justifiable tautology. (Messenger 208 – His italics)

Thus, *The Godfather* contains a conventional cultural element that ensures a continuity of the American discourse in the context of the late sixties. The Don and his son represent an “optimistic evolution” of the Manifest Destiny; they both rise from poverty and a position of weakness to manifest their destiny of becoming emperors of the underworld, facing hardships from the American system and their equal competitors. *The Godfather* ensures a continuity of the Manifest Destiny with an attitude of disclosure towards its discourse of virtue, engraving its position as part of the American popular culture fabric. In the words of Messenger, “no wonder Puzo’s mob narrative has become a compelling version of our national story” (Messenger 209).

In comparison, *Fight Club* represents a radical change in the concept of the Manifest Destiny. The invention created by Chuck Palahniuk rests in the shift of the perspective he introduces to one of America’s most important cultural

concepts. Indeed, as the narrative maintains an anti-consumerist agenda, it imposes a new perception of the virtuous Manifest Destiny. The antihero of *Fight Club* rises from his own ashes to face the new enemy of postmodern conditions of capitalism. As capitalism is a fundamental component of the discourse of the Manifest Destiny, *Fight Club* fights the enemy from within; as Bishop puts it: “The protagonist first attempts to fight the capitalist system from both within and without” (Bishop 41). This introduces a revolutionary change in the way this discourse is supposed to be held. It also reflects a major dissatisfaction in the way its vehicles determine postmodern human conditions.

From *The Godfather* to *Fight Club*, the changes that occur to the discourse of the Manifest Destiny are even more symbolic from one context to the other. Unlike Michael Corleone who maintains his Manifest Destiny through a discourse of disclosure, Tyler Durden deconstructs his through a spirit of destruction. The shift of perspective reflects a tremendous change in the cultural manifestation of American discourses. Indeed, the two contexts gather an interval of almost thirty years when human existence witnessed a variety of changes including historical and cultural upheavals such as the Vietnam War and the Cold War, economic crashes, scientific and technological inventions, the development of Internet and the digitalization of every human function. Consequently, these changes affect the narratives of certain cultural concepts such as the Manifest Destiny, especially in a nation built on the power of its myths and the discourses that transmit them.

The millennial popular culture projects a variety of narratives in which the antihero proudly manifests his destiny of destruction in order to rebuild his life anew and resist the forces of subjugation. The advanced institutions of capitalism usually represent the new enemy which is threatening humanity, as Fisher points out: “Time after time, the villain in Hollywood films will turn out to be the 'evil corporation’” (Fisher 18). The antihero’s fight to ameliorate human conditions represents a diagnosis on the evolution of the Manifest Destiny and its effects on the human state of mind. To that end, the devaluation of human essences is proved to be an outcome of the materialistic discourse of the Manifest Destiny.

To conclude with, this chapter aimed at investigating the Manifest Destiny as a virtuous narrative that legitimizes the practices of capitalism in postmodern America. It first explained the ethical boundaries of American capitalism and its evolution as a “soulless” system, controlling economic and sociopolitical conditions. It, then, elaborated on the forms of capitalism depicted in *The Godfather* and *Fight Club* and analyzed the effects of the materialistic discourse on the path of the antihero. Michael Corleone portrayed a faithful depiction of the American *Homo economicus*, mirroring by that the American creed of violent and criminal enterprise. *Fight Club*, for its part, presented the outcome of such faithful servitude to a “soulless” form of capitalism and reinterpreted the condition of slavery as a postmodern cult of consumerism.

The devotion to “soulless” capitalism was investigated within the cultural mold of the Manifest Destiny. Both narratives delegitimized this metanarrative as virtue was replaced with a crude order of crime. *The Godfather* presented destiny as the highest form of authority that guides the lives of the characters. By following the American tradition of legitimizing criminal business under the disguise of virtue, the novel exposed the Manifest Destiny as a metanarrative that primarily justifies and prioritizes capital interest. *Fight Club*, for its part, depicted this cultural pillar as an enemy to destroy from within. As its capitalist gadgets grew uncontrollably invasive, radical measures were taken to save the self from its fatalistic deterioration and reconnect it with its subjective experience. As both novels expose the realities of the Manifest Destiny – one of America’s most important founding concepts – the shift of emphasis from a position of continuation and subtle disclosure to an attitude of negation and destruction reveals a meaningful cultural and social transformation in the American mind.

Though capitalism was related to the cultural doctrine of the Manifest Destiny in this second chapter, it remains, as a primary function, an economic system, conceived to fulfill a basic need. This thesis transcends the physiological necessity to explore the personal paradigm and its sentimental scars. Indeed, as the materialist aspect of the antihero’s journey has been explored, the intimate aspect is part of the next chapter. While attempting to “delegitimize” the

Manifest Destiny from its narrative of divine election, Michael and Tyler are stripped from their protective armors to be rediscovered as vulnerable characters under the modeling of their families.

Chapter Three:
The Desacralization of the Divine
Destiny

The American nation proudly considers itself elected by God to lead the world towards the path of hope and prosperity; a pristine and holy manifest destiny under God and his witnesses. As both religious institutions and sentiments are immensely queried in the postmodern condition of skepticism, the antihero stands as a Judaist blasphemer who questions the sanctity of the American Manifest Destiny. He not only challenges the existence of a deity that could assign such glorified commissions, but also dares to position himself as an omnipotent force in charge of his own destiny.

The American antihero is the product of his social upbringing. His rise to fame in American popular culture has long captivated the attention of critics in the academic sphere for what he unveils as social and psychological conditions in his environment. Subject to a multitude of subjugating powers, he emerges as a retaliating force to amend his miserable circumstances. The third chapter of this thesis navigates through the personal and sentimental elements of the antihero. Through its three sections, it investigates his efforts to divest the Manifest Destiny from its sacred qualities. The first section taunts with the premise of a replaced divine order where the antiheroic path of crime proves to be a destiny beyond God, created by “god-like” apotheosis. The following section revisits the patriarchal discourse imposed on the female character in the representation of the Manifest Destiny. Evidently, this reveals a state of unredeemed violence, a case that denudes the Manifest Destiny from its legitimizing narratives. Finally, the third section evaluates the progress of desacralization and its contextual rationale from *The Godfather* to *Fight Club*.

I. A Destiny Beyond God: The Ungodly Apotheosis

In a state of complete dismay towards any form of divine being, divine scheme or divine order, the antihero forms his own authority by which he creates his own manifest destiny. The rejection of a superior power involves all forms of authoritative figures, including that of a vigilant father who, as in the case of *The Godfather*, attempts to create his own divine decree over his family. The rise of Michael Corleone as a god(less)father stands against both the inherited Catholic faith and his father's mighty control. *Fight Club*, for its part, depicts a new kind of desacralization of the concept of the Manifest Destiny which not only rejects the involvement of deity – and by extension fatherhood – as a relevant figure, but attempts to replace it with an autonomous human power that could perhaps amend the degenerate state of humanity.

1. The Rise of the God(less)father

In his famous painting “*The Apotheosis of Washington*” (1865), Constantino Brumidi,¹ in the eye of the U.S. Capitol Building, depicts George Washington's spirit elevated into heavens, surrounded by female figures – who symbolize his victory and fame – and a rainbow arching at his feet. The peculiarity of this fresco – like the title indicates – stands for the omnipotent position George Washington has in America as the word “apotheosis” literally means the raising of a person to the rank and glorifications of a god. Brumidi's painting encapsulates the national perception about the Founding Fathers, like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, who stood as the “apotheosis of the god-like... American Moses who led [their] people out of bondage into a land of liberty” (Scott, *The Religious Origins*).² These men were endowed with a “unique” Manifest Destiny, as ordained by God, to shine the beacon of liberty and, if deemed necessary, to spread democracy through violence to other parts of the world (Scott, *The Religious Origins*). In retrospect, these men established their own moral decree through which they could manifest their destiny under

¹ Constantino Brumidi was a Greek-Italian-American historical painter who became famous through his painting “*The Apotheosis of Washington*” (1865).

² This is an e-text; therefore, page number is not available.

divine pretences. In short, they represent “the top one per cent of the one per cent, the ones in control, the ones who play God without permission” (*Mr. Robot* 2015).

To legitimize his sinful family through American conventions, Mario Puzo reenacts the Manifest Destiny as designed by the Corleones, the apotheosis of the “god-like” American leaders. Different from any traditional depiction of religious ascendancy, Puzo’s peculiar style paints a new picture of spiritual religiosity throughout the novel. This section first elaborates on how Don Corleone is elevated to the status of God, ruling the underworld with an iron fist. The substitution of God with a mortal one emphasizes the illicitness of the Corleone business and their destiny in America. As Michael is slowly groomed to take command, the religious aloofness is further accentuated. The new Don learns how to appropriate God’s authority, italicizing that his manifest destiny is devoid from any divine interference. As the novel depicts a subtle transition of power between father and son, the Corleone family under the – not so holy – trinity elements of godfather and prodigal son desacralizes the Manifest Destiny from its consecrated notions.

1.1. In the Name of the Godfather

The novel depicts the Corleones as a Roman Catholic family that does not abide by the moral code of this institution. The narrative is deeply encrusted with religious symbolism that inspires divine justice and wrathful punishment. Starting from the title of the novel, a godfather is a name given to a child’s caretaker during baptism, which gives the reader a preconception of a religious atmosphere. Additionally, the combination of the two words God and Father evokes the potency of both figures. This religious symbolism is used to refer to a majestic sense of authority whereby the earthly father of the Corleone family is equaled to the worldly Father of the Roman Catholic faith.

Puzo forges the association of Don Corleone with God through particular use of language and events. Like God, the godfather is in a constant state of complete awareness. He ensures a fair execution of justice in a godlike manner, with merciless vengeance and “eye for an eye” retaliation. This feature is

established at the beginning of the narrative when Amerigo Bonasera declares: “For justice we must go on our knees to Don Corleone” (Puzo 3). The American judicial system fails him after two young men took advantage of his daughter and savagely beat her to near death only to receive a minimal penalty from an American judge. Bonasera reluctantly bends the knee to the Don’s authority to whom an act of submission is reacquired in the form of friendship: “Be my friend. I accept” (Puzo 22). This request is Bonasera’s way of recognizing the Don as God of the underworld and Father of the powerless, like himself.¹

Puzo depicts Don Vito Corleone as the only almighty authoritative power. His faithful followers – most of them deeply imbedded in the Catholic faith – have no remorse towards God for their immoral crimes; instead, they conform, fear and respect Don Corleone. Michael accentuates his father’s divine position by stating:

My Old Man. The Godfather. If a bolt of lightning hit a friend of his the old man would take it personal. He took my going into the Marines personal. That's what makes him great. The Great Don. He takes everything personal. Like God. He knows every feather that falls from the tail of a sparrow or however the hell it goes. Right? And you know something? Accidents don't happen to people who take accidents as a personal insult. (Puzo 123)

Michael recognizes the godly authority of his father. The religious discourse is inspired from a verse in the New Testament which reads: “Are not two a sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father” (The New Testament, *St Matthew* 10:27–11:1). Business becomes a “personal” state of affairs and the godfather, like God, judges every action according to his own moral account, taking offence from infidels and punishing them with majestic wrath.

¹ Evidently, the Don’s justice is juxtaposed with the American justice; while the former is bestowed upon the weak and the incapable, the latter is exposed as a corrupt, unjust and hypocrite system. According to Cawelti, this is among the frequent glimpses “we get of the endemic hypocrisy, amorality, and brutality of this supposedly respectable American society” (Cawelti, *The New Mythology* 348).

The most zealous form of power Puzo attributes to the Don is the control of death; not only in the Nimrodian¹ sense of ordering the execution or pardon of his unfaithful subjects, but as a metaphysical and mysterious experience that only God could administer.² Puzo emphasizes the Don's godly authority by attributing him the same form of power. As his final act on his daughter's wedding day, Don Corleone visits the hospital in which his former consigliere, Genco Abbandando, takes his last breathes from a terminal cancer. Upon seeing him, Abbandando begs:

“Godfather, Godfather,” he called out blindly, “save me from death, I beg of you. My flesh is burning off my bones and I can feel the worms eating away my brain. Godfather, cure me, you have the power, dry the tears of my poor wife. In Corleone we played together as children and now will you let me die when I fear hell for my sins?” (Puzo 36)

In his analysis of this exact passage, Christian Messenger uses the concept of dialogics³ to identify the power relations from the “politicized” speeches and the challenging rhetoric from each character. Abbandando evokes the godly power of the Don in a blasphemous way, using religious supplication to escape the ghost of death, he expects his Godfather to perform a miracle and cure him from his flesh-eating disease. In case the divine recognition is not enough, he recalls, as his last resource, their memories as innocent children.

In the same way, this last conversation between the Don and Abbandando could be seen as a battle of words, at the level of what Lyotard refers to as “*parole*.” This stage considers the various categories of utterances which could

¹ The adjective “Nimrodian” is used as a reference to the legendary leader Nimrod, king of Shinar in ancient Mesopotamia. The context used in the paragraph above is sourced in the Islamic narrative and refers to a conversation Prophet Abraham had with Nimrod, mentioned in the Holy Quran. Nimrud was challenged by Prophet Abraham who asked him, if he was truly almighty, could he give “life” or “death” to a person. Nimrud brought two of his prisoners from jail. He set one of them free and ordered to kill the other person, interpreting by that his own understanding of controlling “life” and “death.”

² Death is treated differently by various religious narratives. In the Hindu faith, for instance, it is considered as a process of reincarnation in which the soul is reborn in another form to find its true nature in the cycle of life. The Abrahamic faiths, such as Christianity, attribute the details of death to God as part of his mighty powers to control every minimal detail in the universe.

³ For more information on the concept of dialogics, students could visit Mikhail Bakhtin's works on literary criticism (1895 – 1975) in which he attempts to describe the dynamics of language production in the novel. For instance, in his *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975), he analyzes the “political positions” taken by characters in different scenes and narratives. Dialogics helps to identify the power relations within each speech act by participants in the dialogue, including the implicit voices of the author.

be “defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put” (Lyotard 10). Each word carries its own requirements of how and when to be used, as part of *language games*,¹ exactly the same way as “the game of chess is defined by a set of rules determining the properties of each of the pieces” (Lyotard 10).

Lyotard confirms that “to speak is to fight” and every utterance “should be thought of as a “move” in a game” (Lyotard 11). Through his last words, Abbando launches his final fight against the Don, defying his rules and authority, as an apostate challenging his God. The discourse of supplication turns into a discourse of defiance through which he states:

The Don got up but Abbando put out his hand. “Godfather,” he said, “stay here with me and help me meet death. Perhaps if He sees you near me He will be frightened and leave me in peace. Or perhaps you can say a word, pull a few strings, eh?” The dying man winked as if he were mocking the Don, now not really serious. “You’re brothers in blood, after all.” Then, as if fearing the Don would be offended, he clutched at his hand. “Stay with me, let me hold your hand. We’ll outwit that bastard as we’ve outwitted others. Godfather, don’t betray me” (Puzo 36)

Abbando places his utterances in well-designed moves. He first faces the Don with his own frightening soul as it takes an angel of death to “meet” and “frighten” another one. His next “move” is to suggest that a deal between the Don and “death” could be arranged by pulling “a few strings,” which denotes the hidden crimes behind his business deals. This last strike is particularly an unforgivable mistake as it breaks the *Omerta* rule, a code of silence and honor functioning as an oral oath in the mafia underworld. Abbando attempts to remedy this aberration by evoking brotherhood and friendship in committing crimes together, but all his efforts fail and he surrenders his battle against the Don. To further taunt his God, he slyly says: “it’s been arranged then?” To which

¹ Lyotard summarizes Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophical concept of *language games*. Wittgenstein is Austrian-British philosopher who presents a keen interest in the philosophy of languages. He focuses his attention on the “effects of different modes of discourse” (Lyotard 10). These effects are determined by particular terms or “utterances,” specifying their own rules and properties. For further readings on Wittgenstein’s insights on *language games*, students could consult *Wittgenstein Key Concepts* (2010) by Kelly Dean Jolley.

the Don responds, “You blaspheme. Resign yourself” (Puzo 36). The blasphemous act is the defiance of the godfather, facing him with his own murders and breaking the bond of silence that veils the hidden side of his crimes.

Going through a horrifying struggle with death, Abbando experiences different psychological states. He shifts from a position of fear to a position of courage during which he begs and then defies his earthly God, confirming, by that, the strong belief in the Don’s godly powers. The religious connotations in relation with his influence and power reinforce Puzo’s attempts to create a mythical character, intertwining myth and popular fiction at the authoritative and melodramatic level.

The novel compiles a long collection of situations that depict the Don’s exercise of power in various forms. He orders Bonasera’s retaliation by arranging the beating of the two young men who assaulted his daughter – an example of equal treatment of justice. He secures citizenship for a young Italian fellow who wants to marry his friend’s daughter – an example of “his ability to manipulate the government” (Cawelti, *The New Mythology* 335). He also secures a leading role in a new movie for his godson Jonny Fontane – an example of his “control over the worlds of business and the mass media” (Cawelti, *The New Mythology* 335). These various forms of power emphasize the Don’s extra-legal authority to make “an offer” his friends and foes “cant’s refuse.”

To legitimize the Don’s illegal activities, Puzo depicts him as a merciful and companionate apotheosis. These grandiose forms of power are added to his philanthropic actions towards his worshipers. The Don is portrayed as “warm” and “emotional,” involved in every detail of his friends’ life aspects. Puzo establishes this tone repeatedly by stating:

this feeling was nurtured by the poor people of the neighborhood who constantly came to him for help. To get on the home relief, to get a young boy a job or out of jail, to borrow a small sum of money desperately needed, to intervene with landlords who against all reason demanded rent from jobless tenants. (Puzo 182)

In what appears to be a “tribal closeness,” the Don is no ordinary boss; he is a “king, judge and priest” (Cawelti, *The New Mythology* 340). He is willing to use all means to help his faithful friends, including his wealth, his political influence and his godlike manipulation of various institutions. His loyal subjects are part of a family “totality” that protects them against “conflicting social roles” and external enemies (Cawelti, *The New Mythology* 340). Puzo’s novel generates a wide fascination with the new designed authority in the form of a family organization where the Don is convinced with “the idea that he ran his world far better than his enemies ran the greater world which continually obstructed his path” (Puzo 138). After the grooming of his prodigal son is finalized, the godly authority is transferred from Don Vito to Don Michael Corleone and the exercise of power is held differently with a new ruling structure.

1.2. The Prodigal Son

In Puzo’s novel, Michael is not portrayed as a spiritual character. His disinterest in divine semblances distinguishes him from the Old World of his father, and his religious sense is overrun by his utilitarian self-interest regarding the family business. For instance, he is not pleased when his wife Kay decides to raise their children as Catholics; “He would have preferred the children to be Protestant, it was more American” (Puzo 562). The pragmatic aim of securing the Corleone Empire outshines the religious discourse traditionally used to ensure the preservation of Italian heritage. When he is asked to be godfather to Connie and Carlo’s oldest son, he first declines, showing no interest in exercising the initial – and spiritual – aim of his position as the godfather of the family.

John Cawelti confirms that *The Godfather* is “not structured around Michael Corleone's rise in society, but on his apprenticeship to power” (Cawelti, *The New Mythology* 335). Michael learns to appropriate, not just his father’s business, but his godly powers as well, becoming himself the Founding Father of

his own American empire. After the death of Apollonia,¹ Michael is “reborn,” set to manifest his destiny as the new emperor of the underworld.

After the return of the prodigal son, Michael distinguishes himself by presenting his own wrathful style of leadership, a style different from his father’s “emotional” and “tribal” closeness. He is more ferocious and more ruthless when it comes to exercising the Corleone power. As an apprentice, Michael has the patient temper of the Don through which he is slowly groomed under his guidance; yet, the manifestation of his skills are executed with severe callousness and the narrative grows more violent and more obscure under his charge.² The bloody series of assassinations against the other mob families are the final testimony of the end of his internship and the beginning of his fierce ruling “as the most powerful Family chief in the United States” (Puzo 372). After the restoration of power, the Corleone family is “unchallengeable” and a new respect is set among the underworld families.

Michael’s destiny is not mystically enchanted by any semblance of godly blessings. Being the antithesis of a spiritual character, he defies the religious pretences of a blessed manifest destiny. Abiding by the American tradition of peculating God’s authority to design an illicit path, he distinguishes his destiny with a violent and ruthless ruling. Michael is an unspiritual Don and an unredeemable leader. His destiny is certainly determined by convenience instead of conviction as he is elected by circumstances instead of a superior force of a deity.

¹ Apollonia is Michael’s wife during his time in Sicily. His union with her is also a metaphorical marriage with the Old World of his father and the violent path he had previously rebelled against. Her presence makes him proclaim a peculiar Sicilian status and embrace his new role in an alien world. The “overwhelming desire for possession” forces him to admit that he has finally “made his bones” in this foreign environment. Michael loves her passionately as his life becomes “simplified” and everything else is “unworthy of even a moment’s attention.” In an attempted coup to murder him, Apollonia and her unborn child are brutally murdered in a car bombing planned by members of the Barzini family.

² This case is clearly represented in the way Michael handles the betrayal of his brother-in-law Carlo Rizzi. Connie’s husband helped the Barzini family in the scheme to ambush and murder Sonny Corleone. The Don, realizing that his son-in-law is a “rat,” spares his life and allows him to remain in the family to protect his daughter, who is, admittedly, his only weakness. As a Machiavelli leader, Michael masters the art of deception and commits the only crime beyond Don Vito’s power. The godfather had previously ordered his son not to harm Carlo in order not to cause his sister more pain. Michael, however, waits until after the death of his father to mercilessly execute him. This demonstrates his determination to differentiate his reign from that of his father’s, to set forward a new path for the Corleone Empire and a new way of handling the family business.

Evidently, leading a Manifest Destiny in underworld America without divine sanctifications exposes the state of violence adopted by the antihero.¹ The Manifest Destiny is, thus, disrobed from its spiritual peculiarity and disclosed as an unholy path, emanated, perpetuated and regenerated through violence. Both father and son defy God by mastering crime and reinstating his decree on earth, defining, by that, the path of their sinful destiny in America. Through an unconventional depiction of divine order, *The Godfather* demystifies the Manifest Destiny and divests it from its religious narrative of sanctified chastity. *Fight Club*, for its part, exposes a different side of doctrinal “legitimation.” The case of neurosis plagues the foundation of parental – and by extension divine – bonds to create a “nuclear isolation” at the core of the Christian structure.

2. The Death of the God/Father

As both father and God represent the highest forms of authority, an abnormal relationship with the former affects the spiritual connectedness – and even the belief – in the latter. This has already been established by Sigmund Freud who linked his theory of Oedipus complex² to a general resentment towards God through a projection process.³ Namely, in the Freudian framework, the resentment of God – and its consequential lack of spirituality – is sourced in the child’s strong desire to kill or replace his father. Though the Oedipal studies represent the centre of Freud’s psychological projection theory, it is a facultative consideration in the God/father complex. The fact remains that the

¹ This state of violence is further legitimized by Puzo under the discourse of self-sacrifice. This particular point will be elaborated in Chapter Four.

² The Oedipus complex is a term used by Sigmund Freud in his psychoanalytic theory analyzing the stages of development from childhood to adulthood. It stipulates that a child has possessive sexual desires for his opposite-sex parent while considering his same-sex parent as an enemy. According to Freud, this is a crucial stage in a healthy development process. For further readings on this, students could consult from a direct source in Sigmund Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899).

³ Freud conceptualizes the theory of projection as a “defense mechanism” the ego uses to “project” the negative impulses or experiences onto others. In regards to religious faith, Freud sees that the belief in God is a projection of “intense, unconscious desires.” These desires represent the desperate need for protection and security experienced in childhood. The stage of the Oedipal complex reflects on the child’s conception of God whereby he considers both his father and God as rivals for his mother’s love (Vitz 6).

presence/absence of the father is reflected in the belief/disbelief in God, and the two entities affect the personal and spiritual development of any individual.¹

Freud's vision is joined by psychologist Abraham Maslow² who portrays "transcendence" – the final step in his Hierarchy of Needs³ – as a vulnerable moment when the human being begins to feel an intimate connection with the world and the people around him (Maslow, *Motivation* 43). This level, however, is obstructed by the "defense mechanism of desacralization" whereby a person harbors a rejection of the values and virtuous of his/her parents; as a result, he/she is unable to conceive anything as "sacred, eternal, or symbolic" (Maslow, *The Farther Reaches* 69).

Palahniuk depicts the predicament of desacralization by providing no godly or parental authority, guidance or blessings. The narrator is left to his own device to reconnect with people and, ultimately, create his destiny in the world. Even Palahniuk's peculiar style of assembled fragments of thoughts, scrambled prose and detached passages mirrors the loss of meaning and the disintegration of any form of order. With no divine or fatherly sanctifications – as both father and God are figuratively dead – destiny becomes an apotheosized mission, emanating from within and magnified to an idealized and violent extreme.

Fight Club exposes a severe case of fatherly vacancy which punctures the social and psychological stability of the narrator. The father figure roams in the backstage of the novel to disclose the son's psychological disturbances. Since

¹ For further readings on the relationship between the fatherly presence and the belief in God, students could consult Paul C. Vitz's *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism* (1999), in which he exemplifies this case by detailing the spiritual beliefs of famous men and describing how their relation with their fathers affected their perceptions about God.

² Abraham Maslow (1908 – 1970), a Brandeis University psychologist, developed a theory of motivation in his paper "A Theory in Human Motivation" which was considered part of developmental psychology. He regenerated the standard psychological approaches of human nature studies by developing a new method that would depart from the Freudian and the Darwinian school (Griffin 124).

³ Maslow believes that the human being, during the process of self-development, has an "innate" tendency of growth, love and trustworthiness. This process, however, requires three stages which must be fully satisfied before a person could act unselfishly. These three levels are in a hierarchical order and must be climbed upwards as a ladder from the lower needs to the higher ones (Griffin 128). At the bottom of the pyramid is our most Basic Needs which first contain the physiological needs (food, water, shelter, warmth, rest), and the safety needs (security and safety). Next in the hierarchy is the Psychological Needs which consist of belongingness and love needs (intimate relationships, friends), and esteem needs (prestige and feeling of accomplishment). Lastly, the Self-fulfillment Needs which include self-actualization Needs (McLeod 02). This five-stage model takes the human being into a journey of aims and struggles to finally attain his highest purpose in life.

there is no fatherly presence, there is no power struggle or transition, and, ironically, this unnatural void creates an internal conflict. The projection of this void is reflected onto the narrator's spiritual beliefs as God is seen as a careless, vengeful and negligent Father. Evidently, this causes a deterioration of his consciousness in the form of schizophrenic neurosis. As pointed out by Tyler, the affectionate bond between father and son is substituted by an unholy servitude to a corrupt capitalist authority.

2.1. In the Name of The Ghostly Father

The father/son relationship is among the noxious determinants behind the narrator's deterioration. Palahniuk exposes the abnormalities of this relation by keeping the father as a mere reference to emphasize the colossal effects of his absence. This referencing with no actual presence seems to echo Robert Bly's¹ diagnosis which confirms that within the modern family, "there is not enough father," resulting in "father-hungry sons" (Bly 99).

The narrator, as a "father-hungry" son, longs for a meaningful fatherly presence. The effects of the "too little father" situation, to use Bly's terms, clouds his judgment about general perceptions in life. It leaves him in a perpetual state of utter loss, with a sense of "nameless, bitter, unexpungeable shame" (Bly 94). The narrator, during his numerous conversations with his alter ego, occasionally mentions his father:

Me, I knew my dad for about six years, but I don't remember anything.
My dad, he starts a new family in a new town about every six years.
This isn't so much like a family as it's like he sets up a franchise.
What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women.
My father never went to college so it was really important I go to college. After college, I called him long distance and said, now what?
My dad didn't know. When I got a job and turned twenty-five, long distance, I said, now what? My dad didn't know, so he said, get married. (Palahniuk 29)

¹ American poet Robert Bly interpreted in his book *Iron John: A Book about Men* (1990) an extensive exegesis of the German fairytale Iron John. In an increasingly feminist age, Bly attempts to reinstall the importance of masculinity through historical accounts, myths and fairytales. During his quest to retrieve manhood, he witnesses the intriguing phenomenon of "soft male" in the seventies. A generation of young men who he describes as "lovely, valuable" and not interested in harming the earth or starting wars (Bly 3). This gentle attitude is part of their personalities and lifestyles. Bly confirms that these men lack energy or life thrill and are, thus, "not happy." This thesis focuses on his insights regarding parental relationships; however, his views could also be used to elaborate on the representation of macho masculinity in *The Godfather* or on the issue of emasculation and "soft" masculinity in *Fight Club*.

The narrator's father has a six year limit to his definition of a family. He subjects this institution to an expiration date so as not to be eternally tied up by its mandatory responsibilities. Hence, he is allowed to renew his excitement with new experiences in a six year timeframe. His most 'fatherly' contribution to his son's life is his "long distance" and meaningless phone conversations where he presents no valuable life-altering answers. In a desperate attempt to receive his attention, the narrator crystallizes his father's dreams and fulfills his unfinished accomplishments. His aim is to clone his destiny on the aspirations of an absent parent. Though they were only acquainted for six years, the son's hunger for his father still determines his life decisions as an adult.

Since the attitude of the 'good son' who abides by his father's rules does not result in gratitude, attention or compensation – emotional or otherwise – the narrator resorts to violence by "fighting" him through his imaginative duplicate, Tyler Durden:

The first night we fought was a Sunday night, and Tyler hadn't shaved all weekend so my knuckles burned raw from his weekend beard. Lying on our backs in the parking lot, staring up at the one star that came through the streetlights, I asked Tyler what he'd been fighting. Tyler said, his father. Maybe we didn't need a father to complete ourselves. (Palahniuk 30)

The resentment the narrator feels in regards to his father's negligence is exteriorized through his more courageous, more forthcoming alter ego. The projection of this exasperation is communicated through physical violence in the hope of attracting the father's attention. Tyler's negation of the fatherly role in the process of self-fulfillment is, satirically, an emphasis on its importance. Bly confirms this point by stating: "the longing for the father's blessing... is still present... The son particularly receives instead the nonblesser, the threatened, jealous "Nobodaddy," as Blake calls him: "No One's Father"" (Bly 97). The son's frustrations are further taunted by the "Nobodaddy" who insists on bestowing his rejection as a "nonblesser." Since the narrator's father disposes of his families every six years, he is, indeed, "No One's Father."

Along with the occasional phone conversations, the reader receives glimpses of the father's impact on his son. All throughout the novel, the conception of fatherhood is thrown out among nihilistic dogmas, sandwiched within Tyler's philosophy of destruction, "Maybe self-improvement isn't the answer. Tyler never knew his father. Maybe self-destruction is the answer" (Palahniuk 27). The father is, thus, portrayed as a ghostly presence, or as Bly calls him "the demon," in a sense that he is "invisible but talkative"¹ (Bly 95).

Evidently, the dismay resulted from the father's vacancy is projected in the void of spirituality. In a reverse process of power roles, the earthly father determines the existence of the worldly Father in personal faiths; and since there is no father, there is no God. As the first leads a ghostly presence, the second might as well be a fabricated ghost. This link is established by one of Tyler's followers, "the mechanic," who says:

"What you have to understand, is your father was your model for God"... "If you're male and you're Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or dies or-is never at home, what do you believe about God?" This is all Tyler Durden dogma." (Palahniuk 90)

The anguish of the father's absence puts into question the ethical judgments of God as the attributor and designer of family structures. The colossal damage experienced by the narrator as an individual is reduced to a simplistic wondering; if God, "merciful and gracious," truly exists, why would he allow such fathers, these progeny dispensers, to exist? The narrator's faith is shaken, which only stresses the potency of the father's role on the psychological and spiritual development of the son.

Similar to the earthly father, God is indifferent, inattentive and disinterested in his own creations. He refrains from electing and blessing his progeny to lead a divine destiny on earth. His alienation from his children amplifies their sense of despair and distress. The "father-hunger" takes a binary dimension to denote a

¹ Bly uses the word "talkative" as an emphasis on the effect of the vacant father. His absence hunts the son and "speaks" to torment his consciousness as he struggles to navigate through childhood and adulthood.

yearning for both father and God, two authoritative and guiding figures upon which moral stability and guided destiny are built. The mechanic carries on:

"What you end up doing," the mechanic says, "is you spend your life searching for a father and God." "What you have to consider," he says, "is the possibility that God doesn't like you. Could be, God hates us. This is not the worst thing that can happen." How Tyler saw it was that getting God's attention for being bad was better than getting no attention at all. Maybe because God's hate better than His indifference. If you could be either God's worst enemy or nothing, which would you choose? We are God's middle children, according to Tyler Durden, with no special place in history and no special attention. Unless we get God's attention, we have no hope of damnation or Redemption. Which is worse, hell or nothing? (Palahniuk 92)

Unlike Cronus¹ who loathes his children due to a struggle for power, the worldly Father despises his own due to a lack of that same power struggle. The postmodern "snowflakes" no longer dare, defy or confront; they are worthless to God who could neither punish nor reward them, neither damn nor redeem them. Their destiny remains barren, devoid of any divinely blessed election. As they are subjugated by their abstract totem of consumerism, God dispenses of them in the same manner they dispense of their useless commodities.

In a desperate attempt to win God's attention and receive his calling to manifest a divine destiny, these men resort to violent tantrums to experience his wrath or mercy. Otherwise, they could be cursed in a modern worldly form of Asphodel Meadows,² where souls are trapped in "a dark, gloomy, and mirthless place" (Reece 390). This "dank house of Hades" (Homer 381) represents a home to the most pathetic and senseless spirits who wander around purposelessly "like shadows." This is mirrored in Tyler's notion of "hell or nothing" where the former is much more tolerated and appreciated. The narrator is the embodiment

¹ In the famous Greek mythology of Titanomachy, also known as The Battle of the Titans, Cronus, the youngest of the first generation of the titans, is in a fierce war with his son Zeus over the ruling of the universe. He had himself overthrown his father Uranus, the ruler of the universe, to take power. As Cronus matures in his authoritative position, each time he impregnates his wife Rhea, he swallows his newborn in fear of being dethroned by one of them, a scenario that he actually witnessed with the victory of his son Zeus. For further readings on the dethronement of Uranus and Cronus, students could consult Robert Graves' *The Greek Myths* (1955).

²Asphodel Meadows was previously conceived as pleasant and charming place by Homeric commentators and post-Renaissance English poets. Homer's books 11 and 24 of *The Odyssey*, however, portrayed a gloomy and dark place where the spirits of the dead swell aimlessly (Reece 389).

of a senseless and worthless spirit who lives in his own Asphodel Meadows. Though he constantly crowds his house with purposeless commodities, he is doomed in a perpetual state of nothingness. Declaring war on God, drawing his attention and accepting his punishment is far more appeasing than the calamity resulting from “nothing.”

As expected, the consequences of father hunger and spiritual void shatter the psychological development of the narrator. His sanity and mental stability crumble under a schizophrenic neurosis. He becomes divided from within between an emotionally tortured son and a narcissist alter ego. On the one hand, this struggle allows the narrator to plunge in an “inward journey” of self-discovery whereby he revives his long-sedated pains and anguish; on the other hand, Tyler is summoned to appease his existential crisis and fill the vacancy of both father and God to lead him towards his destiny. This particular role stresses his grandiose narcissism¹ which is exposed through a series of cynical, almost sadistic, rants. As the narrator shies away from any form of display of his intellectual and inspirational capacities, his alter ego exhibits a more flaunted form of self-praise and admiration.

2.2. The Divided Son

Joseph Campbell approaches schizophrenia from a “mystical” angle by relating the psychology of the schizophrenic process to the mythology of the hero’s journey in life. In a compelling parallel, Campbell sees schizophrenia as an “inward and backward journey to recover something missed or lost, and to restore, thereby, a vital balance” (Campbell, *Myths* 132). To that end, it is by drowning into the deepest seas of despair that one might finally recompose himself by extracting the “one green value” of his life.

¹ Grandiose narcissism is characterized by a behavior of dominance, arrogance, exploiting others and exhibitionism. The most consuming motive behind the grandiose narcissistic behavior is the endless quest for gratification. For further readings on this issue, students could consult Kelly Dickinson and Aaron Pincus’ “Interpersonal Analysis of Grandiose and Vulnerable Narcissism” (2003).

The experience of schizophrenia is, according to Campbell, sourced in the parental approach to culture and life in general. Ideally, responsible parents ensure that the “signals” imprinted on their children will “attune” them to, and not alienate them from, the world they live in (Campbell, *Myths* 139). This allows a proper immersion in the “system of sentiments” by which cultural values are rationally adapted. Parents have the responsibility to communicate the adequate messages that properly relate their children to their own environment, instead of a nostalgic period in the past, sanctimonious desired future or – worst of all – “freakish sect” or momentary fantasies and trends (Campbell, *Myths* 139). When these terms are not respected, the result is what Campbell calls in mythological terms a “Waste Land” situation. Pathos of communication is created between the individual and the world as he is “cut off,” “thrown back” and divided as a schizophrenic in a “padded cell” (Campbell, *Myths* 139).

As a consequence of his father-hunger, the narrator’s consciousness deteriorates under a misrepresentation of cultural signals and elements. This directly affects his authenticity and uniqueness as an individual in a mass-produced culture, “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 86). In terms of giving meaning to his existence, he does not have any destiny to manifest, fulfill or propagate. Left to his own devices, he yearns for a referential connectedness with a meaningful past while he is pushed “fast-forward to the future” (Palahniuk 111). Even worse, he falls prey to the cult of consumerism which concludes the combination of a defective cultural identification. He is, thus, alienated from the world and trapped in a Waste Land situation. The narrator’s schizophrenic “inward and backward journey” is set to recover a form of parental guiding which allows him to create his heroic destiny and reestablish communication with his environment.

The narrator’s inward journey is centered on satisfying his hunger for a father presence. Following the schizophrenic childhood process, Campbell believes that a child raised by a father who “had been nobody, a nothing, of no force in the home at all; where there had been no sense of paternal authority”

(Campbell, *Myths* 143), the schizophrenic's quest will primarily be a "decent father image, and that is what will have to be found: some sort of symbolic realization of supernatural daughterhood or sonship to a father" (Campbell, *Myths* 143). Since the narrator's father is a "Nobodaddy," a ghostly presence that eludes the narrator's mind, the latter devotes his quest to finding a father figure that could implement its presence, force its authority, offer its moral guidance and guide him towards his destiny, all requirements projected in his own alter ego Tyler.¹

The narrator falls prey to what Campbell fears most in the child's identification with culture; a "querulous, freakish sect, [a] momentary fad" (Campbell, *Myths* 139). For the narrator, this "sect" takes the form of sedative consumerism as he identifies himself through his condo, his furniture and his job. His mediocre career is only a means to overindulge his sedated spirit, as Tyler puts it:

You have a class of young strong men and women, and they want to give their lives to something. Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they don't need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need. (Palahniuk 96)

The career choice is directly attached to the commodity benefits it could supply. Individual talents are extinguished, personal motivations are exterminated and inspirational causes are annihilated; all in sacrifice for the deities of consumerism which take an infinite number of forms. The professional career is no longer a manifestation of intellectual progress; rather, it is an abhorred means to gorge a hollow spirit.

¹ The creation of Tyler emphasizes the narrator's utter loneliness. The father figure could not be found in any of his surrounding elements; not in therapy groups, in IKEA furniture or sleeping medications. Combined with the complete absence of friends and relatives, the narrator relies on his own mind to create a compensation for what he misses most. His schizophrenia is a manifestation of his broken consciousness, but it is also his only resolution to resist his "defense mechanism of desacralization" and reconnect with the world.

The narrator's career is a testament on his servitude, an unholy path that deepens his spiritual void. Before Tyler could remove this last pine, he often repeats in his dogmatic manifesto: "If you're male, and you're Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And sometimes you find your father in your career" (Palahniuk 122). Since the father-hunger is intensified as the narrator matures into adulthood, it is substituted by his mediocre professional career, and the personal and sensible bond between father and son is replaced by a profitable exchange of service.

To save the narrator from this last dilemma, Tyler alters the state of servitude his career forces him into. He begins by exciting his dulled senses through the small mischievous missions. The self-congratulatory speeches he delivers in front of people are a substitution of words of encouragement delivered by a proud father. As a caring father-figure, Tyler is constantly on the watch for the men involved in his fight clubs. He travels tirelessly around the country to liberate, encourage and embolden them to break their chains and manifest their destinies. For most of them, he concretizes the concept of a true father. This conception is escalated to a worldly position whereby these men worship him as their own God.

Campbell warns about one adventure of "great danger" to the schizophrenic mind; that which is known in psychology as "inflation." This state of mind overtakes the psychotic individual and delays his return to sanity. "Inflation" is the overestimation of the savior's role, as Campbell puts it, "we may all be saviors when functioning in relation to our friends or enemies: savior figures, but never The Savior. We may all be mothers and fathers, but are never The Mother, The Father" (Campbell, *Myths* 143). The narrator's 'relationship' with Tyler reaches the point of obsession. He inflates his savior's role and hands him, by that, all forms of power and control over his body and mind. "Tyler's dumped me. Because my father dumped me" (Palahniuk 86), Tyler becomes the reflection of his own father. When the return to sanity begins its course, the narrator loathes Tyler's disappearance – a previously lived experience with his father. The

“inflation” is further escalated to position his alter ego as The Savior, who, throughout the narrative, is glorified in a religious sense.

Tyler imposes his own version of religious spirituality. He negates Christianity as a religious metanarrative – which he deems mundane and boringly common – to create his own form of symbolic totem; the religion of Tyler. He begins his questioning of Christian basic tenets at the very beginning of the novel: “Where would Jesus be if no one had written the gospels?” (Palahniuk 1) Evidently, this doubts the creed of Christianity and sets a general tone of skepticism throughout the entire narrative. The displacement of Jesus as the most famous and historical leader allows Tyler to create a vacancy he could clog:

There's a fight club in the basement of the Armory Bar on Saturday nights. You can probably find it on the list Patrick Madden was compiling, poor dead Patrick Madden. Tonight, I go to the Armory Bar and the crowds part zipper style when I walk in. To everybody there, I am Tyler Durden the Great and Powerful. God and father” (Palahniuk 70)

Tyler fills the binary hunger of both earthly and worldly father. As he is fathered from the narrator’s mind with no male genetic composition, he simulates a postmodern version of Jesus Christ, with fight club as his church and Project Mayhem as his gospel. Since he is both Father and Son, he embodies the image of duality and, therefore, of power sharing between God and Jesus. Tyler takes over The Father and The Son. Substituting the Trinitarian powers elevates him as a religious totem for the narrator and the other fight club members, prophesying, as such, the new faith that could heal their spiritual abyss. The unholy apotheosis is now mystically equipped to elect his worthy people and lead them towards their manifest destiny.

As both father and God are absent and inattentive, the narrator fosters his own parental guidance and divine sanctifications. Tyler demystifies the Manifest Destiny by standing as both God and father, electing his own chosen people, blessing them in their anarchist journey and providing a new glorious mission that eradicates the postmodern form of slavery. “You're not your job. You're not your family” (Palahniuk 92), the identification through commodities, the

inexistent father and the existential crisis are amended by Tyler, so that all there is left is the narrator alone. With a new destiny to manifest and a reestablished grandiose self-worth, the narrator is stripped from all temporary bandages, standing with his wounds wide open. He has “hit bottom” and is ready to be “resurrected” through his backward journey.

In both novels, the abandonment of a divine scheme guiding a heroic manifest destiny ultimately exposes the element of violence in its raw state. Michael Corleone peculates the doctrines of God, while Tyler Durden is more invasive in his attacks against religion and his endeavors to create his own spiritual decree. The resulting dictum is a destiny beyond God, manifested by ungodly apotheoses. Violence is, thus, celebrated as part of the American life and unredeemed by legitimizing metanarratives. To accentuate this process of “delegitimation,” both novels discard the male heroic narrative which has long served as a redemption mechanism and a justification for the hero’s use of violence. Though *The Godfather* and *Fight Club* are almost exclusively male-dominant narratives, this does not negate the fact that women have considerable power in directing the life courses of Michael and the narrator/Tyler, the details of which are discussed in the second section.

II. The Destiny of the Female Savior

In what appears to be a timeless Manifest Destiny of American virtue, divinity and regeneration, women have certainly had a role in the inception and perpetuation of this discourse. In John Gast’s famous painting “*American Progress*” (1872),¹ a female figure is depicted in an angelic figure, roaming the sky while leading the expansionists towards the western horizons. Gast’s oeuvre reflects on the position of women in the development of the Manifest Destiny. Seen as the matrons of the house, women “valued domesticity, piety, and other feminine virtues and largely avoided the masculine world of politics” (Caughfield, *Women*).² In a myth created by – and destined for – men, women

¹ John Gast was a Prussian-born American painter who became famous through his “*American Progress*” as an allegory for the Manifest Destiny.

² This is an e-text; therefore, page number is not available.

were secluded in their domestic sphere.¹ Though they influenced the progress of westward expansion,² their main tasks emanated from within their secluded domesticity. Their adherence to the philosophy of the Manifest Destiny was resumed to “Church activities, temperance goals, education endeavors, and other attempts to establish comfortable and safe communities” (Pruitt 134).

The symbolism of women as defenseless creatures played an important role in the progression of the Manifest Destiny. According to Laurel Clark Shire, a teacher at the Western University, white women’s presence capitalized on the symbolism of the frontier experience; images of “imperiled women presented settlement as the spread of domesticity and civilization and rationalized the violence of territorial expansion as the protection of women and families” (Shire 80). Thus, women were used as an alibi to justify the genocides against Native Americans and legitimize the violence used to exterminate them.

In terms of the American mythogenesis, this further solidifies Slotkin’s claims about moral violence and the frontier experience. According to him, the frontier’s violence has to be submitted to an ethical character that legitimizes the state of savagery. This violence must abide by a moral code to control the hero’s impulses and redeem his resort to brutality. Thus, the hero must display the following aspects: first, he has to demonstrate an attitude of self-restraint that would legitimize his violence as disciplinary and indispensable. Second, he has to rescue a female which will bring him back to the “White civilized order” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 552).³

Eventually, this reflected upon the depiction of women as subservient to men’s power. The constructs of the Manifest Destiny – among other American myths that revolved around the accomplishments of men – solidified a gender role standard for the savior white male and the saved white woman. In American

¹ Even when tracing the Manifest Destiny to the early Puritan settlements (as discussed in Chapter One), women still abided by a patriarchal discourse – aspired mainly from religion – that excluded them from any form of power.

² According to Shire, during the Expansionist Era, the federal government relied on “women’s physical labor to create homes, farms, families, and communities” (Shire 80).

³ In literature, this could be exemplified by what Slotkin terms “the female captivity myth” in which the ‘savage’ Indian kidnaps a defenseless white woman, forcing the hero to resort to violence in order to save her. Thus, the woman is used as a means to exterminate the Natives and redeem his violence.

literature, women are usually condemned as powerless creatures in desperate need for a male protector. This particular aspect would become part of an archetypal pattern that would penetrate American culture and determine the artistic representation of gender relations. While part of the hero's destiny is to save and protect the female, her destiny is to discard her abilities, resign to her fate and surrender to his power.

Contrary to common belief, this issue is still relevant in a postmodern context. Muhammad Rizqan Ihnadi, a professor at Airlangga University, believes that: "although the condition of women in contemporary American society is progressively better in the last couple of decades, arguably the portrayal of women in contemporary American novels is still biased and unrealistic in some aspects" (Ihnadi 2). Evidently, American literature still portrays these inferior gender stereotypes typified by the heroic discourse of the Manifest Destiny.¹ The following section reflects upon the postmodern conflict of gender relations which encompasses the rising tensions between the two sexes.

In the case of *The Godfather*, women are enforced in a traditional separate sphere. They abide by the submissive role inscribed in the Manifest Destiny; nevertheless, within their domesticity, they dare to expose the real identities of their husbands while attempting to save their ethereal destiny. *Fight Club*, for its part, depicts the postmodern emancipated woman who no longer relates to her role assigned by the Manifest Destiny. She claims instead a heroic part that proves her power and challenges the traditional course of this myth. Just as the abandonment of divinity exposes the state of violence inscribed in the Manifest Destiny, the abdication of the binary gender roles of savior/saved discloses an unredeemable violence and, thus, a delegitimized destiny.

¹ The formula of savior male/saved female penetrates the core of popular culture. This could be seen, for instance, in popular fiction through comic books and movies (*Superman, Batman or Spiderman*).

1. Souls Saved by Matron Saints

From a feminist perspective, the female characters of *The Godfather* are dominated by the patriarchal power. The subordination of women preserves the sacred institution of the family, and their impassivity maintains the superiority of men's authority. Their presence is viewed with very low esteem, as the Don emphasizes: "there is nothing I find so little to my taste as carelessness in life. Women and children can afford to be careless, men cannot" (Puzo 250). French feminist Christine Delphy contends that all relationships between the two sexes are based on power and the aim of men is to keep all of it (Delphy 60). In Puzo's narrative, women do not represent a real threat in the domain of competitive business; therefore, they are not considered as equals in authoritative power. Although the whole family is united as one entity, the Corleone women live in a separate sphere with an attributed role of the doll in the house.

Whereas the underworld Dons control through political and disciplinary power, women in *The Godfather* master the celestial tasks of prayers, funerals and commutes. The feminine sphere is closely – if not exclusively – related to religion. Women's mission as intermediates between men and God is to purify the souls of their husbands from the loads of sins. They are given the role of "saints" to ensure their salvation. Though these men never speak of religion as if it is "a losing cause," they still need the sense of inner peace by securing the redemption of their souls.

This stand is set at the beginning of the narrative when the Don scolds his godson Johnny and says: "You let women dictate your actions and they are not competent in this world, though certainly they will be saints in heaven while we men burn in hell" (Puzo 27). The misogyny towards women as incompetent creatures is immediately rectified by the religious discourse. Women are "saints" who must surrender their earthly position, at least in the family business, for the greater reward of heaven.

Katherine Adams, also known as Kay, reenacts the conventional subjugation embodied in the patriarchal discourse of the Manifest Destiny. As an only child to a prestigious non-Italian family from Hanover, her character represents the American outsider who forces herself into an alien patriarchal world. Symbolizing the postmodern emancipated woman, she is educated, “too thin,” “too fair” and “too sharply intelligent for a woman” (Puzo 8). Kay transitions from an independent American woman to a domestic American wife. Kate Millet, in her book *Sexual Politics* (1970), believes that patriarchy relies on the discourse of the “Other;” she claims that “patriarchy has already been established and the male has already set themselves as the human form, the subject and referent to which is the female is ‘other’ or alien” (Millet 25). Kay’s desperate attempts to win Michael’s heart and integrate his closed-family circle cause her to sacrifice parts of her own identity. She willingly accepts the position of the “Other,” a discourse that abides by her ancestral role in the Manifest Destiny.

As previously discussed, Michael considers his marriage with Kay as a business deal. What is meant to be a personal and intimate relationship is turned into a beneficial and egocentric concern: “Now what do I want you for? Well, because I want you and I want a family. I want kids; it’s time” (Puzo 309). Since Kay is viewed as a ‘pure’ American, she is pragmatically chosen as a life partner by Michael who desperately attempts to integrate the American mold. His desire to marry her concretizes his ideal dream of joining the “general family of humanity.” Thus, she relates precisely to her role in the Manifest Destiny: that of assisting her husband in achieving his own.

Kay retrogresses to her basic duties inscribed in the Manifest Destiny. Her spousal task is restricted to obeying her husband and helping him achieve his destiny – a role she was precisely chosen for. Following the steps of her mother-

in-law,¹ she is stripped from all forms of power except the religious commute. According to Lois Tyson, Professor of English at Grand Valley State University, the main issue in “getting beyond any ideology that dominates the way we think is the problem of one’s own *subjectivity*: one’s own selfhood, the way one views oneself and others, which develops from one’s” (Tyson 95 – Her italics). Evidently, Kay chooses to perceive herself as subservient to her husband’s will. When she accepts Michael’s “marriage deal,” she is completely unaware and alienated from the “truth” of the Corleone family. After she witnesses the homage of Michael as the new Don after the death of Carlo Rizzi, she understands the reality of her husband and the empire behind him. After an inner battle to accept her fate, Kay converts to Catholicism and decides to raise her children as Catholics as well.

Nevertheless, from within this domesticity, she is the only one allowed to reveal the real identity of her husband and shed light on his state of violence. Kay becomes a devout Catholic, taking Communion and attending early mass every morning with Mama Corleone. The church becomes her sanctuary where she feels safe “to think about her husband’s other life” (Puzo 374). The novel ends with Kay in another introspective scene:

Washed clean of sin, a favored supplicant, she bowed her head and folded her hands over the altar rail. She shifted her body to make her weight less punishing to her knees. She emptied her mind of all thought of herself, of her children, of all anger, of all rebellion, of all questions. Then with a profound and deeply willed desire to believe, to be heard, as she had done every day since the murder of Carlo Rizzi, she said the necessary prayers for the soul of Michael Corleone. (Puzo 377)

¹ As the representation of the Old World, Mama Corleone chooses to perceive herself as inferior. She abandons all of her skills and potentials, including the ability of perception. As she willingly alienates herself in her domesticity, she is in no position to comprehend anything outside of her sphere. She remains impassive even in expressing her emotions. Symbolically, whenever she is mentioned, food and drinks are always a priority she must provide. It is her duty, under all circumstances, to respect her labor inside the family. Mama Corleone chooses to abide by the power of patriarchy in which she is satisfied with her “primitive culture.”

Michael Corleone is unveiled as a criminal by none other than his wife. Though she is considered as a means to solidify his dream, she is no longer presented as a defenseless creature. Through her consensual submission to patriarchy, she chooses to redeem his soul instead of redeeming his violence. Kay does not convert out of belief in the doctrines of Catholicism. This religious act is a testament of her heroic self-sacrifice to care for Michael's progress in life and afterlife. She has the mission to save her husband's soul from eternal damnation. Shattering her naivety, she is in a state of full awareness of the truth. She exercises the only religious power in her hands to assure that his soul does not "go down there."

While tirelessly attempting to legitimize the Corleone family within the cultural mold of Manifest Destiny, Puzo surrenders this mission to his female character. The discourse of obedient saints in their separate sphere is not meant as a degrading inferiority of women. It is almost ironic how *The Godfather* is deeply rooted in a male-dominant culture where women are completely alienated; yet, they are the deciders of fate, destiny and beyond earthly matters. It is through them that we are enlightened to the naked truth about the Corleone identity with no intervention from the author to legitimize it.

Admittedly, the argument of spouses being the saviors in *The Godfather* could be contentious as they are completely secluded in a patriarchal world. Nevertheless, the narrative portrays women who voluntarily embrace the subordinate role without the desperate need of a heroic rescue. When estimating their position within the constructs of Manifest Destiny, they are no longer willing to reenact the defenseless role in order to legitimize and redeem the hero's violence. *Fight Club*, for its part, maintains this endeavor with far more complex gender roles in which women are equal competitors in a capitalist market.

2. The Mission of the Postmodern Heroine

As a multifaceted novel, *Fight Club* carries a variety of interpretations, particularly on the issue of feminine representation. On the surface, the narrative seems to be written precisely to denounce women as the impostures who are waging a war of emasculation against men. Tyler admits that “What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women” (Palahniuk 28). The sentiment of gratitude towards women is overshadowed by a general disdain towards their suffocating presence. The novel depicts a generation of “soft males,” emasculated by feminist forces and forbidden from expressing their masculinity. The dethronement of men is portrayed in their lost sense of virility – physical and mental – and their inability to refrain women from attaining capitalist success, rendering them equal competitors in business.

The emasculation tone is set through Bob in the Remaining Men Together support group for testicular cancer. As a man with no testes – insinuating the extreme castration of men – Bob is described as someone with “new sweating tits that hang enormous, the way we think of God's as big” (Palahniuk 5). Bob was a bodybuilder before his cancer treatment escalated his estrogen hormones and lowered his testosterone hormones, substituting, by that, the massive muscle tissue with saggy fatty tissue around the chest area (Baker 78). The feminized description, along with the sobbing method stereotypically attributed to women, are often considered as an emphasis on the capitulation of men under more feminized forms of physical and emotional expressions (Baker 78). The feminine gender is, thus, symbolically related to a cancerous disease that robs the body of its original and natural allure.

The issues of masculinity and gender misrepresentation in *Fight Club* have created amplified criticism in the academic arena. Many critics try to figure out

the position of the author,¹ the narrator and his alter-ego in regards to women. Some critics would argue that Palahniuk attempts to make a point in regards to capitalism and the issue of men and women in the work force. Indeed, gender relations in a consumerist society are characterized with tensions between the sexes, as Lynne Layton, Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychology, states:

Tyler's analysis recalls that of Lasch, blaming it all on women, feminizing consumer capitalism as if capitalism has anything to do with femininity. He does so not just by summing it all up in the figure of Martha Stewart, which is precisely what the media did in 2004. The blame is also evident in Tyler's first comment about the worse fate being castration by a woman. And while this comment goes by as quickly as the subliminal cuts of Tyler do before his character is introduced, we should note the fear that's expressed here... women not just as agents of castration, but also as agents of rejection. (Layton106)

The discourse of victimization enforces cynical blame on women for exercising an emasculating form of power. Evidently, this could all be seen as a typical sign of a bruised ego of socially-endowed men;² portraying women as monsters is more tolerable than recognizing them as an equal force. In light of this particular view, successful women under the opportunities of capitalism render the narrator and his alter-ego envious and nostalgic for their primitive sense of masculine entitlement.

As previously discussed, Henry Giroux, claims that *Fight Club* is an attack on postmodern feminism that attempts to discredit male virility through violence. For instance, he sees the support groups for testicular cancer which the narrator attends as a mockery of postmodern men. The very nature of the disease itself,

¹ Palahniuk's stand on women, usually perceived as pejorative and misogynistic, could be an expression of a helpless distraction from his sense of shame and injustice. Palahniuk came out as a homosexual in an interview battle with Karen Valby. His coming out was unintentional as he had previously showed a strong desire to keep his personal life a secret. After the murder of his father and the death of his mother with breast cancer, Palahniuk struggles with confused gender politics.

² Endowment refers to a philosophical concept that denotes human functions and capacities which are naturally or socially acquired. Social endowment is analyzed through cultural discourses, outlining human nature and ethics in societies. Historically, men are socially endowed with a particular set of rules and behavioral patterns to follow. Physical and moral strength, repressed sensitivity and power over the 'weak sex' are part of the socially and culturally transmitted discourses that have ensured the resistance of patriarchy (Lin & Forrest 12).

and the resulting hormonal imbalance which causes the formation of breast tissue, symbolize a process of castration to eliminate masculinity and virility. Moreover, the healing procedure in which a crying circle is formed and men hug each other to unburden is seen as degrading and emasculating (Giroux 19).¹

While these criticisms are enlightening, capturing and well-founded, they have not considered the issue of masculinity (or even consumerism) from a feminist perspective, one that sanctions the patriarchal discourse typified in the myth of the Manifest Destiny. Instead of accusing Palahniuk of writing a novel “about men,” it could also be enlightening to show how he succeeds in delegitimizing the patriarchal discourse of a myth that usually condemns women as defenseless damsels. It is essential to recognize how the narrative breaks the conventional “patriarchal pattern of thought.” As researcher Michelle Ferris emphasizes: “the story [of *Fight Club*] begins, not with Adam, but with Eve” (Ferris, *Unmarked Men*).² *Fight Club* must be seen with a “nonconformist eye” in order to appreciate how it succeeds in demystifying the Manifest Destiny.

Marla, the spokeswoman of the novel, is the embodiment of the postmodern emancipated woman. In a culture that focuses on the external appearances of women, Marla’s dark figure, pale face and mouth pouring smoke breaks the social standards of beauty, to Harman, Marla looks like an imitation of the grim reaper (Harman 210). Her job as a prepaid funeral plans allows her to defy her culture which “has made death something wrong” (Palahniuk 64). She experiences a cancer scare twice while feeling a breast lump, but she chooses not to medically diagnose or treat her case. For her, death is an acceptable fatality. Marla’s philosophy of life is “that she can die at any moment. The tragedy of her life is that she doesn’t” (Palahniuk 66). Unlike the “snowflakes men” depicted in the novel, she forges her identity with an attitude of bravery and defiance. By actually “hitting bottom,” she breaks the patriarchal norms of beauty, success and domesticity to reclaim control over her own destiny.

¹ For further readings on gender representation in *Fight Club*, students could check Omar Lizardo “Fight Club, or the Cultural Contradictions of Late Capitalism” (2007) and Sally Robinson “Feminized Men and Inauthentic Women: Fight Club and the Limits of Anti-Consumerist Critique” (2011).

² This is an e-text; therefore, page number is not available.

Unlike the narrator, Marla, by the end of the narrative, is able to resist consumerism and reject the material world; this makes her one of the strongest character in the novel. Her strange aspects divert her from the typical feminine characterization of the 'good woman' and place her instead on a brave pathway that men aspire to attain. Through her brazen persona, the reader experiences *Fight Club* not as a male-dominant narrative that subjugates the female, but as a novel that depicts a strong woman who overpowers men in capitalist success and cultural resistance.

Marla's independent spirit is mostly presented in her heroic role, redirecting, by that, the trajectory of a Manifest Destiny that now experiences women as the new heroes. While the "snowflakes men" are constantly claiming the feminine stereotypes (female breasts, crying, compulsive shopping, weak personalities), women are undertaking the heroic mission of saving lives. The narrator perceives Marla as a threat that disrupts his illusions; yet, her presence reflects the realities of his own actions, "In this one moment, Marla's lie reflects my lie, and all I can see are lies. In the middle of all their truth" (Palahniuk 10). Her intrusion forces him to face his own reality as a "faker," and the shattering of this illusion initiates the first step towards his inward journey. Marla saves him from insanity by awakening his soul from its illusive hibernation and recalling him to the crude reality within a hyperrealist world.

Marla represents the thread of reality that rescues the narrator from his illusions and helps him return to sanity. By the start of his backward journey and as he begins to realize his split of consciousness, he asks Marla to reveal his identity: "I ask Marla what my name is. We're all going to die. Marla says, "Tyler Durden. Your name is Tyler" (Palahniuk 104). Symbolically, she is given the power to affirm the return to reality and declare the disunion between the narrator and his alter ego. Marla saves the narrator from utter destruction, claiming by that the heroic role in the novel. Since the balance of power between the sexes is disrupted, the binary gender roles of savior/saved is reversed. Evidently, since there is no defenseless woman to save, the state of violence remains unredeemed:

“I know all of this: the gun, the anarchy, the explosion is really about Marla Singer” (Palahniuk 4). Since Marla is the new savior in a challenged patriarchal world, the Manifest Destiny remains denuded, demystified and delegitimized from its heroic narrative.

Resuming the earlier comparative pattern, the ambivalent relationship between the sexes is symbolically different in *The Godfather* and *Fight Club*. As both Michael and Tyler impose their masculine authority – or wish to do so – on women, the sentimental implications are undeniably representative of a progressive attitude, implicating the desacralization of cultural foundations. From *The Godfather* to *Fight Club*, the formula of demystifying the Manifest Destiny matures from a stand of defiance to an approach of disavowal.

III. The Formula of Desacralized Destiny from Defiance to Disavowal

According to Lyotard, knowledge – including narrative knowledge – is itself “rooted in unprovable assumptions.” He concludes that the destruction of metanarratives is a consistent condition of “postmodern knowledge” (Lyotard 54). Nasrullah Mambrol, a research scholar at Kannur University, believes that postmodernism steps at this precise point as a “pragmatic response to the problem of legitimation which attempts to provide alternative narratives, but nevertheless spurns the pretension to universal knowledge claims” (Mambrol, *Key*).¹ Thus, as the American nation promotes self-proclaimed assumption of divinity, the metanarrative of Manifest Destiny is being increasingly revisited by the currents of the postmodern condition that questions the religious peculiarity of this grand narrative.

The Manifest Destiny was established on the premise that America had a “divine providence,” a holy mission to expand its borders and spread its ideals. This consecrated spirit was engraved within the Americans who believed they were executing God’s will in spreading, controlling and guiding human destiny. As noted, this usually entailed a sanctified immorality in which the Manifest Destiny was used as a metanarrative to legitimize violence and capitalist success

¹ This is an e-text; therefore, page number is not available.

while blessing any trespassing with a divine decree. In short, “God bless America”¹ remains the long-lasting belief that has constructed a palpable unifying spirit to the nation.

A secularized American nation still proclaims a destiny blessed by a divine order; this provides a certain peculiarity to the individual experience. The American audience is already familiar with a destiny constructed by self-made apotheoses who declare themselves as representatives of a divine decree on earth. This directive entails a manifestation of God’s command while employing self-reliant measures to conceive and perform this path. The Manifest Destiny is, hence, an expression of a “god-like” American who legitimizes his actions under absolute divine rulings.

As part of Puzo’s efforts to instill his novel within American conventions, *The Godfather* replicates this secular/divine antagonism of the Manifest Destiny. Don Vito Corleone, symbolizing the Old World and its conservative mores, stands as the apotheosis of his destiny. Abiding by the circumstances he is coerced into, he designs his criminal path to ascertain a well-established capitalist prosperity. Vito duplicates to the fullest extent a divine decree on earth, representing a sanctified order that matches God’s in justice, mercy and wrath. Like the Founding Fathers, he keeps the sentiment of divinity as a spirit that provides “a deeper resonance” to his destiny, while peculating God’s denomination, power and authority.

Michael Corleone, symbolizing the New World and its rebellious attitudes, defies the religious discourse of the Manifest Destiny with a more taunting approach than his father. Representing the new antihero of a complex period, he embodies the spirit of opposition the sixties are famous for. Popular culture witnessed the rise of challenging discourses that aimed at dismantling the traditional metanarratives of society. Simmons describes the rise of the antihero in the American novel at that particular time and states:

¹ “God Bless America” is used here as a reference to an American patriotic song written by Irving Berlin during the First World War in 1918. These particular lyrics became the maxim of the American nation, believing that God’s blessings are bestowed upon its people.

[the antiheroes'] investigations of the ideological bulwarks of American society led them to argue that more than individual opportunity needed to be unblocked to create a more just and fair system. They challenged the integrity and virtue of basic institutions and values that had taken on the cover of American tradition, like the nuclear family, anticommunism, the economic bottom line, and material progress. (Simmons 11)

Michael addresses the religious character of a fundamental “ideological bulwark” in American society. The Manifest Destiny – which proclaims the virtue of the American people and their institutions – is exposed as a destiny of violence under no particular honors of divine elections. As a patriotic American hero, Michael attempted to achieve this destiny to prove that “individual opportunity” allowed his success in a “just and fair system.” His failure, however, magnified the extent of his disillusionment, and the “integrity and virtue” of the Manifest Destiny was questioned for its economic wars and material savagery.

Michael’s impassiveness towards celestial orders mirrors the contextual reality of the religious recession in the sixties.¹ As he designs and masters his destiny, the American audiences respect his courage in peculating his own path with no religious pretensions. By defying all forms of authority – divine or parental – he reinterprets a denuded creed of his destiny where he withstands the consequences of his judgments and the violence they led to.

In its efforts to denounce this particular narrative of divine election, *The Godfather* depicts violence both as an end and as a means to achieve the Manifest Destiny. Mirroring the American experience, the Corleones, as American author Mark Seal states, were “not mere fictional characters; they were real. And through the wizardry of words and celluloid, that mob family became our family, an integral part of the American family, which endures...

¹ The liberation movements of the sixties generated a religious crisis that questioned the authority and perpetuation of the “Establishment.” The Civil Rights movement, the “Sexual Revolution,” the Vietnam War and Women's Liberation represented the new “alternative” religions (Beckman, *Religion*). According to Daniel Bell, there was a general sentiment of “impatience” towards doctrinal thought and people demanded that “all statements of creed must be personally reinterpreted and justified as individual judgments, not those of God” (Bell, *Religion* 448). Thus, the popular demand was for the reevaluation of divine metanarratives that were overused to legitimize individual behaviors and experiences.

forever more” (Seal, *The Real*).¹ By intertwining the divine order with a well-crafted criminal estate, the novel defies the religious narrative that permits, encourages and sanctifies violence. As the “apotheosis of the god-like” American, the godfather and his son manifest a destiny of crime blessed by a dethroned deity and sanctified by a culturally inherited capitalist spirit.

The rejection of a divine decree guiding an American destiny was further accentuated by the end of the twentieth century. This disavowal appeared in the early 1990s where the “historical tether between American identity and faith snapped” (Thompson, *Three Decades*).² This faith included the multiple glorifying national myths and doctrines. According to Derek Thompson, a staff writer at *The Atlantic*, the “idea of American Exceptionalism has become so dubious that much of its modern usage is merely sarcastic” (Thompson, *Three Decades*). To that effect, the closure of the second millennium generated an aggravated state of skepticism over a blessed Manifest Destiny.³

Popular culture captured the effort of desacralizing American cultural beliefs through a new formula of antiheroes. By representing a reality of defected psychological systems, literary formulas, by the end of the century, emphasized the misleading aberrations of the past to which only the antihero could stand as the savior of himself and others. Simmons explains how this context popularized and hailed him as a superhero, a liberator of the world, especially in comics and popular fiction; he states:

¹ This is an e-text; therefore, page number is not available.

² This is an e-text; therefore, page number is not available.

³ This loss of faith was rooted in the overall disdain towards religion that accompanied the American nation since the 1990s. Religion has lost “its halo,” partly, due to its association with the Republican Party and the end of the Cold War (Thompson, *Three Decades*). Non-religiosity became the “specific American identity” which distinguished the new generation of secular liberals, also known as “nones” (Thompson, *Three Decades*). These “nones” remodeled their own “successful secular system,” restructuring their own perception of belief, purpose and community, as Thompson puts it: “Millions of Americans have abandoned religion, only to re-create it everywhere they look” (Thompson, *Three Decades*).

[Nineties Anti-Heroes are] usually demonic or technological in origin and never received said abilities through the idealistic good graces of *anyone*...In term of characterization, they [are]: brooding, sarcastic, badass, or just plain psychotic. How much of any one side they show over the others is the main thing that sets them apart from each other. (Simmons 70 – His italics)

Tyler Durden is an accurate exemplification of a demonic and psychotic antihero who transcends the subtly defying antihero of the sixties. Never receiving any form of “idealistic good graces,” his character demonstrates the extent of his liberation from any form of communal institution, including family or religion. The context of the millennial imposes a new figure of the antihero in popular fiction which makes the audience perceive literary texts such as *Fight Club* with a great deal of admiration and appreciation.

Fight Club disavows all schemes of divine order to portray a new demystified existence. Unlike the narrative of *The Godfather* which conventionally – and provocatively – depicts an apotheosis destiny with an ineffective spiritual notion, Palahniuk discards all forms of authority – divine and parental – to not only reprimand the extent of a distorted reality, but to castigate the consequences of a sacred Manifest Destiny which has, in a postmodern context, resulted in a cancerous spread of consumerist capitalism and the deterioration of human spirit. With the death of both God and father, the American audience could face this degenerate state of spiritual, psychological and physical chaos without being subject to legitimizing narratives, recognizing that the resulting violence is an inescapable outcome of a historically sanctified doctrine.

Nevertheless, the formula of desacralized destiny in *Fight Club* still births a positive energy in popular fiction. Though the psychological struggle is profound, it allows the antihero to stand as the creator of his own experience, the savior of his own soul and the master of his own destiny, as Joseph O’Neil states:

I think it is more likely that we are experiencing a re-figuration of the ‘Holy Family’ in which the paternal, maternal and filial positions are being redefined. In this process, the new children will adopt both patriarchal and metrical arguments, celebrating their own parthenogenesis. (O’Neil 238)

Fight Club is part of a challenging formula in popular fiction that experiments with the conventional boundaries of cultural doctrines and the religious wisdom assigned to them. This formula redefines the Manifest Destiny as an individual experience to face the reality of spiritual abyss. As exemplified by the narrator, the psychological struggle resolves in the celebration of personal growth and the development of parthenogenesis¹ in a metaphorical sense. This invention includes divine election, paternal relationships, as well as gender relations which embrace a new discourse in regards to women's alliances with men.

For Lyotard, the imposition of metanarratives is witnessed in different fields of "philosophy, politics, society and social theory." The postmodern condition discards the "metanarratives of legitimation" that can no longer analyze the "myriad labyrinthine" of imposed and "privileged discourses" (Lyotard 60). Lyotard's diagnosis of the postmodern condition is interpreted as a "disavowal of the universal aspiration of political action and judgment" (Lyotard 63). Since the "personal is, [indeed], political,"² the male heroic narrative could no longer atone for the state of violence encrusted in the Manifest Destiny. The disavowal of this "universal aspiration" – as the Manifest Destiny has evidently achieved political and doctrinal universality – touches upon the patriarchal "privileged discourse" to delegitimize its imposed heroic pretences and their legitimized violence.

Admittedly, *The Godfather*, portraying an Italian-American heritage, reduces the role of women in its narrative structure. This issue is undeniably a typical part of this particular ethnic literature.³ The feminizing movements of the sixties are not reflected in the gender relations of the novel. Puzo makes his

¹ Parthenogenesis is the physiological act of reproduction in which an egg can develop into an embryo without being fertilized by a spermatozoid. The word is used here in a metaphorical sense to express the postmodern condition of adults birthing their own mental, spiritual and sentimental existence.

² "The personal is political" is a feminist slogan expressing the belief that the personal experiences of women are rooted in their political situation and gender inequality.

³ For further readings on the position of women in Italian-American literature, students could consult Fred L. Gardaphé's *From Wiseguys to Wise Men: The Gangster and Italian American Masculinities* (2006). Gardaphé explains how the inherited tradition of Italian patriarchy imposed an image of masculine power and man's physical strength that enables him to control and dominate women. This was reflected in Italian-American narratives which became prominent in American popular culture since the 1930s.

female characters abide by the Italian tradition of sitting quietly in the background and letting men control their course of life. Gadarphe summarizes the relationship of macho Italian-American men and women by stating: “Mario Puzo’s version in *The Godfather* humanized the gangster figure. However, Vito and Michael Corleone remained staunchly macho, even in the face of increasing rights for women” (Gadarphe 193).

As part of his aim to portray American conventions, Puzo makes his female character regress to the prescribed order of the Manifest Destiny. Her role, however, is that of the savior instead the defenseless damsel. While the American audiences might consider the general tone as derisive towards women being used to fulfill patriarchal endeavors, they certainly recognize the uselessness of redeeming Michael’s violence. Evidently, this further denounces the legitimizing narratives of the Manifest Destiny that rely on divine superiority and morally justified violence.

The role of women is often stressed with disdain in *Fight Club*. As established by many critics, the recognition of capitalist power is established by men with a simultaneous fear of being dethroned, emasculated or feminized. O’Neil summarizes the postmodern condition as a gender conflict in which women are gaining more power over men, he states:

The postmodern condition, as I shall take it, is one marked by a certain disinheritance, the collapse of patriarchy as an effect of a series of defeminizing strategies which simultaneously expand statism, consumerism, globalism and, of course, postmodernism itself. (O’Neil 238)

The idea of capitalized womanhood overpowering men is part of the new reality in the American society. Though women’s effective impact is increasing in all fields, they are despised as a threat for their egalitarian status in capitalist progress.

The formula representing the capitalist struggle between the sexes is another mundane reality the American audience is familiar with. This issue echoes the Foucauldian principle of power struggle. According to Foucault, the vehicles of power are constantly moving among the interplays of dominant

structures. The resentment towards womanhood as a rising dominant structure is almost expected as the balance of power is constantly being fought for between the sexes. The patriarchal society, where men dominate every institution, including the economic structures, is witnessing the fierce competitor of women's power. This situation is seen in many modern civilizations where patriarchy is receiving a firm resistance from women through several liberating movements. Consequently, the narratives of popular fiction are depicting the tension resulting from this clash while revisiting the cultural foundations of assigned gender roles.

Fight Club dispenses of the patriarchal discourse to emphasize the role of women on a culturally profound scale. Embracing a more advanced form of anarchy than the narrative of *The Godfather*, *Fight Club* abandons the "weak female" tale conventionally adopted to redeem the hero's violence. In a reverse process, the female character is the heroin in charge of fate and destiny. Women in Palahniuk's narrative represent the unity of consciousness, the sanity of the mind and the recall to reality; they are the awakening partners that guide men out of their illusions. Their real power is still resisted, not by a religious narrative, but by an attitude of resentment as a form of denial of their potency in determining personal paths.

To conclude with, this chapter aimed at analyzing the antihero's attempts to desacralize the Manifest Destiny and denude it from its divine narratives. Michael Corleone followed nature's course in dethroning his father from the Corleone Empire and initiated a more ruthless form of leadership. As a typical representation of the American apotheosis who designs his own divine order, Michael follows the American convention of a destiny is fashioned as an unholy mission of capitalist dominance, devoid from sanctified and mystified notions. Ultimately, this defined him as one the most merciless antiheroes in popular fiction.

Tyler's attempts to demystify the Manifest Destiny and divest it from its divine narratives are more pronounced. As a psychotic apotheosis, Tyler does not only revolt against a sacred decree, he creates his own religious order and sanctifies his destiny on earth. Like Michael, he does not need the heroic pretences of redeeming his violence. For Tyler, destiny is characterized by its spiritual abyss and disavowed for its dispersion of consumerist capitalism.

In an attempt to divest the Manifest Destiny from all forms of heroic pretences, Puzo and Palahniuk attribute a special type of power to their female characters. By tempering with the patriarchal discourse of this myth, women are portrayed as the saviors of souls and sanity. From within their chosen domesticity, women in the narrative of *The Godfather* proclaim the savior's role by ensuring the salvation of their husbands' souls. *Fight Club*, for its part, depicts women as the new heroes, promulgating, by that, a new gender role in the constructs of the Manifest Destiny. By discarding the male savior/saved female discourse inscribed in the Manifest Destiny, the state of violence remains unredeemed and unredeemable.

The antiheroic efforts to desacralize one of America's founding concepts are closely reflective of a contextual reality. The formula created between the defiance of Michael Corleone and the disavowal of Tyler Durden mirrors the progressive state of the religious crisis and the audience's lack of faith in the divine and heroic peculiarity of the American nation, engendering, as such, more truthful forms of popular fiction.

As we progress in the "delegitimization" of the Manifest Destiny through the antihero in popular fiction, we reach the higher level of cultural entanglements that conceive the antiheroic embryo within a purely American womb. The central cultural feature that shapes the antihero's destiny is violence. Michael Corleone plays within the strings of conventionally criminal violence while Tyler Durden aims for a more primitive sense of chaotic anarchism. Evidently, their objective is to defy the "regenerative" narrative of the Manifest Destiny, in which violence could only be atoned for, controlled and morally

justified. The following chapter claims that the antihero's brutality is founded and intertwined with the mythical structure of regenerative violence.

Chapter Four:
Violence and the Frontier
Experience

As the antihero manifests his destiny in an unsettled postmodern world, he rejuvenates the frontier experience in a more extreme manner. Since the frontier defines and constitutes the core of the Manifest Destiny, the two concepts will be used interchangeably throughout the whole chapter. As noted, the antihero denounces and defies the thematic triad of virtue, divinity and regeneration that characterize the Manifest Destiny. In the following sections, it will be argued that his redeeming and regenerating frontier missions could only be achieved through violence, itself part of the mythogenesis that built America. While the Manifest Destiny stipulates that the frontier hero redeems and regenerates humanity, the antihero exposes the exact process behind this regeneration.

As previously discussed, the frontier experience conceived biblical and moral justification for the state of violence against the Native Americans. The pattern of “legitimation” reoccurs as often as the nation needs to expand its hegemony. The antihero delegitimizes this metanarrative to demonstrate that regeneration is not only directed towards the ‘savage’, the ‘untamed’ and the ‘uncivilized’. It is, more importantly, essential for an American omnipotence, one that could only be maintained through the practice of violence. It is, thus, a regeneration of the Manifest Destiny; a regeneration through violence.

This chapter is divided into three sections that evaluate the cultural dimensions and implications of violence adopted by the American antihero to manifest his destiny. The first section elaborates on the “legitimation” of violence which evolves from the metaphorical self-sacrifice of *The Godfather* to the literal human sacrifice of *Fight Club*. The second section enrobes the antiheroic violent practices with the frontier experience to investigate the antihero’s regenerative purposes. Finally, the third section extends the collected enquiries to elaborate on the comparative process of the evolution of violence between the two contexts of the narratives.

I. Sacrifice and Violence

Before investigating the concept of regenerative violence through the frontier experience, this section elaborates on its justified forms as practiced by the antihero. As the metanarrative of the Manifest Destiny classifies violence as a moral necessity, the following paragraphs will determine how it is both legitimized in Puzo's *The Godfather* and delegitimized in Palahniuk's *Fight Club*.

As previously discussed, Puzo legitimizes the Corleone destiny under the emblem of family/business protection, exposing by that the un-virtuous capitalist narrative of the Manifest Destiny. He amplifies the reader's sympathies towards the Corleones by portraying them within a mythical frame of "god-like Americans," desacralizing, by that, the Manifest Destiny from its divine pretences. Puzo proceeds in legitimizing the Corleones' criminal violence to engraft their position within an American cultural nest, disclosing, by that, the narrative of legitimized violence in the Manifest Destiny.

Palahniuk adopts a more aggressive approach in delegitimizing the Manifest Destiny. His antihero replaces the consumerist fatality of the Manifest Destiny with a mission to restore the subjective experience. He also desacralizes the narrative of divine election by negating the Christian order and substituting it with his own apotheosis decree. Palahniuk progresses to brazenly reject the legitimizing metanarratives of the Manifest Destiny to embrace violence as a factual part of its frontier experience.

Sacrifice is the ultimate form of redemption. *Fight Club* embraces sacrifice as the only plausible solution to break the chains of modern slavery. Evidently, this entails the amplification of violence from an individual practice of criminal violence to a collective form of chaotic violence. Palahniuk does not attempt to legitimize it as he delivers his antihero as the creator of a new cosmos, assembled from chaos to retrieve a spiritually pure human product. Tyler is willing to design an orderly chaos, with human sacrifice as part of an imposed fatality endured for the enhancement of the world.

1. Self-Sacrifice and Criminal Violence

Puzo's efforts rest on situating the discourse of violence in the paradigm of sacrifice. Although the phenomenon of sacrifice is a central characteristic of religious discourses,¹ it also carries a secular meaning that transcends religious traditions and resonates as a propellant aspect of modernity. Indeed, a variety of disciplines, including cultural anthropology, theology, religious studies, and philosophy have reignited their interest in the notion of sacrifice, stressing the fascination it engenders in a modern context. According to Jan Willem van Henten, a history professor at the University of Amsterdam, there is an "emotionally charged" relation between sacrifice and violence, between self-sacrifice and autonomy (Henten 4). The new interest in secular sacrifice analyzes it within the public and private spheres that relate it to "self-destruction and merciless terror... to devotion, submission, and self-effacement for the benefit of other people" (Henten 4). The violent aspect is "over-emphasized" to denote the variety of dimensions violence could take.

Violence is symbolically related to the idea of sacrifice – either of the self or of the other in *The Godfather*. According to French historian René Girard, all forms of violence, including criminal violence, could enact the notion of sacrifice. In his *Violence and the Sacred*, he states: "If sacrifice resembles criminal violence, we may say that there is, inversely, hardly any form of violence that cannot be described in terms of sacrifice" (Girard 10). This relation is best established by the Corleone members who, as a family, develop a collective consciousness about the necessity of sacrifice for the survival of the empire; and more often than not, this sacrifice is "emotionally charged" with criminal violence.

¹ Sacrifice is part of several religious practices and narratives. Famous stories from the Torah, the Qur'an, and the Bible – such as "Abraham's sacrifice" and Christ's death, exemplify sacrificial practices and their lasting effects in modernity. For further reading on sacrifice in religious traditions or in modernity, students could consult "Love as Gift and Self-Sacrifice" by Claudia Welz.

Sonny Corleone is the first collateral damage of criminal violence for the sake of the empire. The making of his “destiny” is manifested at the age of thirteen when he witnesses the murder of Fanucci by his own father. The violence implicated in this incident constrains him to unwillingly sacrifice his childhood innocence and prematurely usher the world of organized crimes. The violent temper he would develop is justified and legitimized under moral and psychological effects this experience shocks him into. His murder under the hands of the Barzini family is depicted as the ultimate sacrifice for the Corleone cause. In his desperate attempt to keep the underworld war under control after the shooting of his father, Sonny falls prey to his own uncontrollable violent tempers. Breaking the enclosed location protection protocol to quarrel with his abusive brother-in-law, he is unrecognizably shot several times by the family’s enemies. Ironically, on his way to inflict physical violence on Carlo, he is fatally entangled in criminal violence. This ignites a full scale war between the five families where acts of violent retaliations are brutally executed. Sonny’s death is seen as a sacrifice for it allows the reshuffling of the underworld power elements. As this violence leads to more violence, it symbolically resolves in peace pacts, with a fresh basis that “gets rid of the bad blood” (Puzo 119).

The violent sacrifice of Sonny is also treated as a symbolic call for peace. The Don, during the underworld summit meeting, uses his favorite son’s death as a victimization plea to gain the trust of the Families: “I’m willing to make the peace,” he said. “Tattaglia has lost a son, I have lost a son. We are quits. What would the world come to if people kept carrying grudges against all reason?” (Puzo 242). Evidently, this peace offering is a manipulation tactic to safely bring Michael back from Sicily. Paradoxically, this sacrifice is seen as the only solution to avoid more violence. According to German philosopher Ingolf U. Dalferth, the paradox of sacrifice is that “it is always a question of avoiding violence against the Other through violence either against others (sacrifice) or against oneself (self-sacrifice)” (Dalferth 79 – His italics). Sonny’s murder ignited the underworld war and his memory extinguished it. The underworld fires are ceased, the safety of all men is restored and the sacrifice of one brother

ensures the safety of the others, all in service of the awaited son to lead the empire in his due time.

The violence committed by Michael Corleone is legitimized under the narrative of self-sacrifice for the general good of the family. Girard believes that self-sacrifice is an act of “consensual violence.” Evidently, Michael consents to his self-sacrifice by proceeding with the execution of Sollozzo and McCluskey: “Tell the old man I learned it all from him and that I’m glad I had this chance to pay him back for all he did for me. He was a good father” (Puzo 123). Michael’s first act of violence is a just revenge for the attempted assassination of his father who is too pious to agree on the drug traffic deal. This violence is legitimized as part of the Corleone’s representation as “morally sympathetic” victims of a corrupt and unjust society” (Cawelti, *Myths* 528).

Even more so, this first act of violence preserves the security of the Corleone family against further attempted murder. Exceeding the personal need of vengeance, violence is legitimized by Michael’s sacrifice to protect his own family: “Michael Corleone frowned. He said quietly, “As the Consigliere, you agree that it’s dangerous to the Don and our Family to let Sollozzo live?” “Yes,” Hagen said. “OK,” Michael said. “Then I have to kill him” (Puzo 124). The necessity of this sacrifice is considered by Dalferth as another paradox, he states: “This is the second paradox of sacrifice: one must use violence *against oneself* in order not to subject others to violence” (Dalferth 79 – His italics). Michael believes that his self-sacrifice would prevent the attacks from the other Families, an aberration he would later correct as he matures in leadership.

Girard, in his attempts to analyze the relationship between violence and sacrifice in primitive and modern societies, states: “Only violence can put an end to violence, and that is why violence is self-propagating. Everyone wants to strike the last blow” (Girard 27). As violence engenders more violence, retaliation is a predisposition that survives in modernity as part of human nature. To that end, striking the “last blow” is interpreted as a winning sign for the prevailing party, ensuring the establishment of its system of power. Triumph in

this violent war requires an act of sacrifice which ultimately serves to “restore harmony to the community” and to “reinforce the social fabric” (Girard 8).

The climactic series of assassinations planned by Michael against the leaders of the Families consolidate the power of the Corleone reign and conclude his complete immersion in the underworld as the successor Godfather. His rivals interpreted the peace pact previously sealed by Don Corleone at the summit meeting as a sign of weakness:

The puzzling factor was why Don Corleone had sued for peace after the death of his favorite son. It was an acknowledgment of defeat and would almost surely lead to a lessening of his power. But they would soon know. (Puzo 240)

Evidently, the Corleones predicted another attack, which was actually attempted on Michael in Sicily. Before the enemy could strike again – which was planned after the Don’s death – Michael afflicts the “last blow” and executes every rival leader. Upon realizing that “only violence can put an end to violence,” this preemptive assault reestablishes the power of the Corleone members and ensures their security and superiority. Michael’s self-sacrifice restores the harmony of the underworld and reinforces the fabric of their mafia society. The symbolic conjunction of violence with moral self-sacrifice consolidates his position as a victim of a force beyond his will that keeps dragging him into the dark path of crime.

Self-sacrifice is manifested in a metaphorical sense in *The Godfather*. Michael’s symbolic violence against himself is enacted by sacrificing his soul to the darkness of the underworld. Henten believes that the expression of self-sacrifice results in a “denial of autonomy” (Henten 20). Indeed, by committing to criminal violence, Michael sacrifices his heroic status, his position as an independent, law-abiding and well-educated citizen, and more importantly, his dream of integrating society as a ‘true’ American. He further sacrifices his life and soul for legitimizing his family’s business. Girard concludes that violence is exercised more efficiently if it is regarded “not as something emanating from within..., but as a necessity imposed from without” (Girard 14). Evidently,

Michael's violence, though undeniably part of his concealed identity, is enforced upon him under the discourse of family priority. The criminal violence he commits is legitimized as an inflicted calamity and is, thus, excused after the colossal sacrifices he is willing to make.

Violence and sacrifice would become a common characteristic of gangster saga in different popular cultural works. David Chases's TV series *The Sopranos* (1999) presents Tony Soprano as a mobster who leads a criminal organization in the late nineties. After suffering from severe panic attacks, Tony engages in therapy sessions with a psychiatrist throughout the series. These sessions would reveal his real character and the tensions he has with the people he is close to. Violence in *The Sopranos* is also used as a discourse of courage and sacrifice; during one heated session with his psychiatrist, Tony admits:

We're soldiers. Soldiers don't go to hell. It's war. Soldiers kill other soldiers. We're in a situation where everybody involved knows the stakes and if you are going to accept those stakes, you've got to do certain things. It's business. (*The Sopranos* 1999)

Business is war, and by definition, war entails an actual self-sacrifice to its enacting discourse of violence. Murder is morally admissible as an act of sacrifice that ensures the triumph of the war. Like soldiers, Tony fights his battles honorably to secure the ascendancy of his business. He is convinced that his violence would not lead him to hell as hell is reserved for "the worst people" who commit evil for pleasure. The religiosity of his speech emphasizes the moral and symbolic considerations of his violence. Like Michael, Tony is in a constant war to secure the power of his business.

From the above, we could deduce that Puzo's pattern of legitimizing violence under the narrative of self-sacrifice and moral obligation duplicates the last theme of the Manifest Destiny. As part of its perpetuating discourses, this myth conceals violence under the perception of necessary evil to regenerate and redeem humanity, a noble cause for which all Americans must sacrifice their privileges. Puzo concocts an antihero who abides by this covenant to blatantly expose the Manifest Destiny within criminal practices and institutions.

While violence remains a static characteristic of postmodern fiction, its forms and practices differ according to the contextual determinants, mirroring by that the conceptual changes that occur in society. While *The Godfather* depicts criminal violence through incorporeal self-sacrifice, both concepts of violence and sacrifice escalate in function and gravity in *Fight Club*. Sacrifice is magnified under a heroic discourse of human demise and becomes an imperative factor in a paradoxically organized form of chaotic violence.

2. Human Sacrifice and Chaotic Violence

Violence in *Fight Club* begins at the level of the individual through the creation of underground fight clubs. The physical connectedness emanating from bare hands and shirtless bodies produces a crude rawness which only in its boorish and savage forms could birth a sense of reality that saves these worthless men from postmodern damnation. British sociologist Simon Williams and his counterpart Gillian Bendelow discuss the postmodern condition in relation to the body organ and state:

While postmodernist attempts to deconstruct essentialism, mind-body dualism and interior-exterior notions of the self are indeed important, they nonetheless result in an ultimate dissolution of the body itself as a shifting, unstable, (inter)-textual effect. Bodies, in other words, become elusive, de-materialized, incorporeal entities through a postmodern bracketing of ontological questions (i.e. the search for underlying 'essence') and a prioritization instead of a relativist epistemological stance. (Williams & Bendelow 126)

The disassociation of the mind and body duality results in the neurosis of the former and the "dissolution" of the latter. The narrator's disconnectedness from his reality causes his schizophrenia and, ultimately, distances him from his own body. This now useless mass of organs functions purposelessly and wonders elusively to remedy the overwhelming sense of despair. The body represents the first barrier to the soul and in order to awaken the spiritual senses, the perfectibility of the physical entity has to be disfigured through an experience of pain.

In order to retrieve this “missing body,” Tyler aims at inducing a shock that could both awaken the physical and spiritual senses of his followers. The epistemology of pain and emotions, according to Williams and Bendelow, creates a “corporeal notion of the ‘mindful’ body” (Williams & Bendelow 126); they add:

[...] pain and suffering give rise to the quest for meaning, interpretation and understanding, while at a pragmatic level, the telic demand of pain is to get rid of or master one’s suffering; instead of just acting from the body, I act toward it in the hope of finding relief.
(Williams & Bendelow 62)

As an initial form of destruction, Tyler’s fight clubs are essentially designed to relocate a sense of meaning in the swirl of hyperrealism. Inflicting pain on the body shatters its elusive artificiality and enlivens its dulled senses. In a world where perfection is modeled on a virtual reality, pain allows the recreation of tangible bonds between body and mind, permitting a new existence and a reconnection with human sensibilities: “At the time, my life just seemed too complete, and maybe we have to break everything to make something better out of ourselves” (Palahniuk 52). Violence, at this level, recovers the basic entities. Tyler is compelled to take fight club “up a notch” in order to persevere with his mission; Project Mayhem is, then, born, ascending the scales of violence to a more revolutionary sense of chaos and elevating the experience of pain to a drastic form of human sacrifice.

Human sacrifices are first used to denote a process of liberation whereby Tyler threatens worthless men who settle for mediocre jobs instead of following their passions. Their identification cards are collected to ensure the absolute operation of this process: “We each had to bring Tyler twelve driver’s licenses. This would prove we each made twelve human sacrifices” (Palahniuk 98). At this level, fight club is fully armed with assault guns which its members use to progress with their intimidation order. The human sacrifice in this sense is a distress signal of an upcoming violence which Tyler deems necessary for the actual recreation of a new world order.

Human sacrifice evolves into a cleansing process documented by myths and history. In the narrative's most cathartic scene, Tyler kisses the narrator's hand then pours lye on it to create a kiss-shaped excruciating chemical burn. This kiss would become the badge of honor of fight club, shared by all members as a symbol of spiritual alleviation through physical chastisement. Tyler, in his endeavors to make the narrator "hit bottom," is already getting more obscurely violent. "Soap and human sacrifice go hand in hand" (Palahniuk 43), he goes on explaining how historical records of human sacrifice – practiced in ancient civilizations by burning people as part of religious ritual – formulated a "thick white discharge" formally known as soap. Thus, human sacrifice becomes a purifying symbol that serves the expurgation of civilization.

As previously discussed, Tyler regresses to this particular ancient practice and attempts to recreate the same cleansing process by recycling body fat from liposuction clinics. The reminiscence of an actual human sacrifice is emphasized as he systematizes this process to his men and tries to incorporate it as a symbolic order of their new destiny:

It was right to kill all those people," Tyler says.

...

Think about the animals used in product testing.

Think about the monkeys shot into space.

"Without their death, their pain, without their sacrifice," Tyler says,

"we would have nothing." (Palahniuk 44)

While the essence remains the same – the killing of people and animals for a cause – the implication of human sacrifice is no longer used to accumulate favors from a mythical deity; rather, it is revived by Tyler as a mandatory fatality for the restoration of society. The calamitous death of some allows an improved life for others. Girard believes that people exclude human sacrifice from all other forms of sacrifice, dwelling on the "sadistic" and "barbarous" aspect of the custom; thus, "one particular form of sacrifice is isolated from the subject as a whole" (Girard 20). To salvage this aberration, Tyler includes human sacrifice as an orderly form, praising it as necessary, morally right, holy and heroic.

Human sacrifice does not exterminate human existence; it identifies it. When Big Bob is killed in a vandalistic operation of Project Mayhem; suddenly, he is given his identity back as fight club members chant his name repeatedly:

"His name is Robert Paulson."
And the crowd yells, "His name is Robert Paulson."
The leaders yell, "He is forty-eight years old."
And the crowd yells, "He is forty-eight years old."
He is forty-eight years old, and he was part of fight club.
He is forty-eight years old, and he was part of Project Mayhem.
Only in death will we have our own names since only in death are we
no longer part of the effort. In death we become heroes.
And the crowds yell, "Robert Paulson."
And the crowds yell, "Robert Paulson." (Palahniuk 116)

Tyler insists that "Bob's human dignity and specificity be recognized" (Sheils & Walsh 109). This death is part of his adherence of human sacrifice for the rightful cause, and only after this sacrifice, is Big Bob allowed to have his identity back as Robert Paulson, the first martyr of Project Mayhem. Death, through human sacrifice for a noble reason, is romanticized as an act of heroism. The violence subsumed within this heroic sacrifice ensures a process of "salvation through identification" (Wink 60) in which the human impairment "saves" and "brings peace."

Tyler organizes this impairment through collective and revolutionary chaos. Violence evolves from a cathartic personal experience in fight clubs to "organized chaos." It begins at the level of individuals who are seeking to break free from the chains of enslaving consumerism and escalates to a progressive level of unified anarchy to restructure modern civilization. Project Mayhem, a developed form of arbitrary violence, is the embodiment of such chaos.

Chaos is not a simplistic concept of purposeless disorder: rather it could be considered as the ultimate form of order since its mechanism and design is often unconceivable by the human mind.¹ Though its ongoing operations are

¹ In their essay "Chaos and Literature," Carl Matheson and Evan Kirchhoff analyze the theory of chaos as a contemporary literary theory and as a philosophy. In their study, they relate chaos theory to poststructuralist criticism and attempt to relate the two disciplines. They use chaos theory to gain a new understanding and interpretation of contemporary literature and base many of their claims on Katherine Hayles whom they consider as a pioneer in the study of chaos theory.

unpredictable, chaos is a response mechanism to psychological, social or economical distress. It is a complex system by which the participant agents express a certain malaise that renders their lives unbearable. Literary critic Katherine Hayles¹ defines chaos as a “complex system that operates according to deterministic laws” (Hayles 306). In other words, this particular concept is determined by an amalgam of preexisting causes and functions as a reaction to their effects. To that end, chaos sheds light upon these situations with “macroscopic expression” (Hayles 307).

Chaos in this case should not be regarded with a derogatory sense. In fact, Hayles believes that chaos should be perceived “not as an absence or a lack, but as the source of all that is new in the world” (Hayles 306). In other words, chaotic situations often result in the creation of new human conditions that shape innovative paths and futures.² Hayles proceeds: “chaos can be assimilated neither into order nor disorder. It names a new territory, designates previously unrecognized interactions, and relies upon different assumptions” (Hayles 306). This transcending concept and the newness it brings allows a better understanding of past deficiencies. More importantly, just like its literal form, chaos births a storm of innovative ideas that pave the way to a “new territory.”

Project Mayhem represents a collective of psychological, social and economical distress. Tyler’s fight club needed to be taken “up a notch;” the violence at the level of individual, while liberating and relieving, could not solve the postmodern condition of disarray at the cultural level:

¹ In her “Chaos as Orderly Disorder: Shifting Ground in Contemporary Literature and Science,” Katherine Hayles considers the theory of chaos as a revolutionary method to approach contemporary literature and science. In literature, Hayles believes that the text is open to an “infinite of readings.” Thus, meaning becomes “indeterminate or disappears all together;” chaos reigns “supreme” as the new deconstructive method to build the premise of literature.

² The representation of chaos in art takes several forms of expression. Being one of the oldest concepts in human history, chaos appears as a basic concept for human creation in several Greek mythologies and biblical stories. Moreover, in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), for instance, chaos is “primordial” as a precursor for all humanity (Hayles 308). Popular culture, in its fictional forms of social and economic revolutions, has been endorsing the concept of chaos whereby change and evolution is always the outcome of the most chaotic situation. The new admiration for chaos as the measure of liberation entails a general sense of frustration towards more civilized reforms.

I shouldn't just abandon money and property and knowledge. This isn't just a weekend retreat. I should run from self-improvement, and I should be running toward disaster. I can't just play it safe anymore. This isn't a seminar. (Palahniuk 38)

Fighting the unhinged conditions of capitalism could no longer solve the narrator's disintegration. As the predicament touches a deeper cultural level, a larger scale of violence is needed to shake the founding core of culture and cause radical changes to the functions of humanity. Project Mayhem, as a complex system of violent chaos, is born to express the amalgamating result of preexisting conditions which are deeply buried and overtly sedated by different forms of hyperrealism.

Project Mayhem is Tyler's manifesto of chaos to create his new world order. The linguistic choice is particularly symbolic; "mayhem" denotes an exasperating state of violent chaos and disorder. This project is meticulously designed to restore modern civilization:

It's Project Mayhem that's going to save the world. A cultural ice age. A prematurely induced dark age. Project Mayhem will force humanity to go dormant or into remission long enough for the Earth to recover.

....

Like fight club does with clerks and box boys, Project Mayhem will break up civilization so we can, make something better out of the world. (Palahniuk 79)

The target aimed by the "space monkeys" is a nearby skyscraper national museum which is filled with homemade bombs. The symbolism behind such setting is to destroy the embodiment of culture itself and reset it from scratch. As the museum represents the symbol of culture preservation, Tyler wants to demolish the old culture to make room for a new one. His aim is to resurrect a pure system based on the ruins and ashes of an old one.

Tyler's chaos has a well-defined purpose and an extremely intricate design of assigned orders. He contrives a sophisticated form of chaos which ensures the execution of purposeful violence:

At the last meeting of the Assault Committee, Tyler brought a gun and the yellow pages of the phone book. They meet in the basement where fight club meets on Saturday night. Each committee meets on a different night:

Arson meets on Monday.

Assault on Tuesday.

Mischief meets on Wednesday.

And Misinformation meets on Thursday.

Organized Chaos. The Bureaucracy of Anarchy. (Palahniuk 74)

From his organized chaos, Tyler creates a highly functional militarized form of anarchy. Violence is coordinated among Committees to achieve a revolution led by unappreciated men. Arson, assault, mischief, misinformation are all different forms violence could take. The success of Project Mayhem would represent the source of “all that is new in the world” from wealth redistribution to the abolishment of the capitalist elites. It would also restore the power of humans “to control history.” To that end, all men must devoutly conform to the essence of this project, body and soul, which reemphasizes the necessity of human sacrifice to ensure the rescue of all humanity.

From the above, we could discern the revolutionary approach *Fight Club* transmits to its audience. Like *The Godfather*, it abides by the covenant of violence based on self-sacrifice. Tyler reenacts the exact patten of the Manifest Destiny, divulging, by that, its violent nature which bases its regeneration on the decay of powerless minorities. Palahniuk, however, willingly fails to legitimize violence under the narrative of moral necessity. His adherence to human sacrifice and chaos are considered extreme and beyond reason, especially in a self-proclaimed virtuous nation.

As the exercise of sacrifice escalates in gravity, the antiheroic practices of violence evolve from criminal violence to chaotic violence; from the personal level to the communal scale. Michael Corleone and Tyler Durden represent an elaborated perspective on the antihero’s adherence to violence; nevertheless, both of them conduct their violent practices according to the narratives of The Manifest Destin. The mythical discourse of violence is particularized under the myth of “regeneration through violence” which Richard Slotkin places as the understructure of the American mythogenesis.

II. Violence and the Frontier Antihero

As previously discussed, the demise of the American hero was an anticipated reaction against the changing political, social and cultural structures. After the Second World War, a myriad of opposing movements rose against historical foundations and birthed a new sense of incredulity towards the established cultural order. Consistently, the core of the American mythogenesis witnessed gradual changes that mirrored the dynamic forces of social and cultural transformations. Several national myths were criticized for their unhinged materialistic spirit; the Manifest Destiny and – by extension – the frontier myth were disrobed of their legitimizing covers to be openly exposed as trespassing, unfair and often violent discourses. Additionally, the American hero was simply shunned and ridiculed for his unrealistic representation of the postmodern version of the American mythogenesis.

The Protagonist is confirmed by Slotkin to be an evolving and dynamic myth-artifact, subject to change as he is altered by contextual and historical forces. The progression of the American mythogenesis welcomes the antihero as the new representative of its constructs; he is the leading figure that embodies the interactions of social and cultural determinations. The forerunner hunter/frontier hero takes a new form of antiheroic actions and functions. The conversion from hero to antihero discards the tedious attempts to suppress violence or provide moral justifications to execute self-centered policies. The antihero elevates the personal over the collective and proudly exposes the crimes behind his material fortune.

Moreover, the Universe, as another dynamic myth-artifact, is also altered by the postmodern gargantuan industrialization and urbanization. Turner's two realms – the Metropolis and the wilderness – fuse under the colossal effect of industrial and technological inventions to form a collectively shared metropolitan experience. Ergo, the wilderness is tamed by the material productions of economic progress, and the adventures of the hero confronting the ferocious wilderness are adapted to the postmodern form of the Universe. The antihero manifests his destiny in a metropolitan setting where the natural order is replaced

by a humanly-established decree and the innate challenges are reinstated as institutional powers.

Slotkin confirms that the interaction of the Protagonist with the Universe creates the events of the Narrative which represents a static myth-artifact in the American mythogenesis. To elaborate on this point, this section analyzes Slotkin's insights on *The Godfather* and *Fight Club*. Under these considerations, Michael Corleone progresses in his mythical journey to become the embodiment of the new frontier experience in the postmodern era. His interaction with a new type of Universe allows him to regenerate through violence his position as the new Corleone frontier. Tyler Durden, for his part, depicts a backward mythical journey that conveys a regression process. Evidently, the return to the past is meant for the regeneration of American cultural foundations.

1. The New Corleone Frontier

The Godfather presents New York underworld as the new setting in which Michael manifests his destiny. The implication is that the underworld stands as the new wilderness with which the antihero interacts to proceed with his regenerative process. Like the highly organized natural cycles of the wilderness, the underworld is extremely coordinated among partitioned districts, where each family has a mandatory respect for the other family's territory. Within this intricate organization, the division of criminal labor ensures an efficient exchange of services and provides a mutual advantage of protection. Moreover, the underworld is ruled and inhabited by the most "relentless executioners" that mirror the primitive perspective of the Indians as "demonic creatures"¹ who maintain the realm of the wilderness.

The implication of the underworld as an allegorical nest of human beasts is explicitly established through the character of Luca Brasi. The Don's personal enforcer, protector and executioner is perceived as a man with a "natural force:"

¹ The consideration of Indians as "demonic creatures" is present in Cooper's last novel *The Deerslayer* in his *Leatherstocking Tales*. The Indians are portrayed as savages incarnating the devil; even their rituals are depicted as barbaric and inhuman. The narrator mentions "scalping" which the Indians practiced as part of a wartime ceremonial activity. The same pattern is witnessed with Luca who takes pleasure in shooting or stabbing his victims in the head to prove his loyalty to his godfather.

Luca Brasi was indeed a man to frighten the devil in hell himself. Short, squat, massive-skulled, his presence sent out alarm bells of danger. His face was stamped into a mask of fury. The eyes were brown but with none of the warmth of that color, more a deadly tan. The mouth was not so much cruel as lifeless; thin, rubbery and the color of veal. (Puzo 15)

As the underworld portrays the demonic wilderness, Brasi is the “monster” who incarnates its savageness. His depiction as the “gargoyle of the devil” is emphasized in the ravishing story Filomena, an Italian servant at Don Tomasino’s house, narrates to Michael. Luca orders her to throw his own baby daughter into an open furnace, just hours after being born. With “bloody, demonical lust,” he watches his own child being burned alive. This barbarian savagery is a manifestation of a devilish personification which foretells the bloody interaction between the underworld and Michael in his due time.

Michael, as the antihero Protagonist, defines his mythical journey through his interaction with the underworld. As he regresses from a state of civility and innocence to that of savagery and criminal violence, the “deep conflict” he endures in his encounters with the mafia Dons initiates him into a life-altering experience. This experience is divided into two phases through which we witness two different types of leadership. As Michael abandons his innocence and dives into the underworld of crime, he matures from the savior to the hunter, from the foreigner to the frontier. This evolution echoes the frontier experience within the formula of the Manifest Destiny, placing Michael as the new frontier of the late twentieth century.

Characterized by deep rejection, the first phase forces Michael into the underworld through an act of self-sacrifice to enact revenge, retaliation and protection. After the attempted murder against his father, Sonny wants to wait for the right time to kill Sollozzo while Hagen wants to avoid violence all together and settle for peace. Michael, however, shows an unprecedented capacity to apply extreme violence by killing both Sollozzo and Captain McCluskey right away. With these two enemies still alive, the godfather would remain captive to their murderous determinations. Michael deems this violence necessary to ensure the protection of his father and the reinstatement of the Corleone family: “it’s an

extreme. But there are times when the most extreme measures are justified” (Puzo 111). This extremism is inserted in him even before his metamorphosis is achieved. As he implements the tenets of the Manifest Destiny, Michael exhibits clear signs of an inherited pattern of practicing and legitimizing violence to protect, survive and regenerate his power.

After the first act of violence is committed, Michael inaugurates his entrance to the labyrinth of his Universe. The underworld is still a hellish place of demonic creatures for him. This persistent rejection entails a delayed reconciliation in the form of a denied identity. On his road to his exile, Michael introspects:

Two hours later the freighter put out to sea and from his cabin Michael could see the lights of New York City burning like the fires of hell. He felt an enormous sense of relief. He was out of it now... All hell would break loose but he wouldn't be there” (Puzo 129).

His vision on New York underworld would affect his perception on America as one entity. Upon enacting his self-sacrifice, New York becomes the forbidden apple and America would represent the lost dream. His “once golden shimmering mirage” (*The Great Gatsby* 2013) is now a place he is glad to depart from. Believing that there would be no repercussions to his actions, Michael is exiled to Sicily, a place that symbolizes the metaphorical bridge that helps him transcend to the second phase of his mythical journey.

To his demise, his journey in Sicily obliges him to accept his fate as the hunter in a uniquely American underworld. Along with unleashing his concealed power and identity after Apollonia's death, his return to the European origins of the mafia society allows him to gain a new perception of the efficiency of the American underworld:

What Michael learned on his own in the months that followed, was that the Mafia in Sicily had become the illegal arm of the rich and even the auxiliary police of the legal and political structure. It had become a degenerate capitalist structure, anti-communist, anti-liberal, placing its own taxes on every form of business endeavor no matter how small. (Puzo 274)

The Sicilian mafia regressed in its heroic endeavors of protecting people from the barons and the Church to subjugating them under a new terrorizing force. This new awareness about the Sicilian mafia and its failure to fulfill its original destiny presents Michael with an opportunity to recognize the potency and efficiency of the American mafia which assures justice, honors solidarity and encourages progress. For Messenger, this success is “a powerful and pervasive moral or idealistic version of the American Dream” (Messenger 14). Thus, the underworld would symbolize a distinctive New World experience which still echoes the American proclaimed ideals of justice, merit and progress.

The return to the Universe of the underworld initiates Michael’s second phase of his mythical journey. The reconciliation with the self entails a reconciliation with the Universe and Michael finally accepts his identity and fate. Slotkin confirms the union of the hero and the wilderness as an initiation to the process of the hunt; he explains:

[The hero’s] adventure is an initiation and a conversion in which he achieves communion with the powers that rule the universe beyond the frontiers and acquires a new moral character, a new set of powers or gifts, a new identity. The spirit that rules the wilderness is embodied in the native persons and animals of the wilderness, but it also is latent within the hero himself. Something below the level of his consciousness responds to the wilderness, recognizing an aspect of his own dream life in the lives of the wilderness creatures. The hero’s mode of interaction with these beings is that of the hunt. He tracks them, learns from them the secrets of their skills and brings to the surface that latent sympathy or consonance of spirit that connects him with his prey. But his intention is always to use the acquired skill against the teachers, to kill or assert his dominance over them (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 551).

Michael is slowly groomed to take command and enact his sacrament with the underworld. We notice his steady evolution and the maturity of his leadership from ponderous violence in restaurants to an intricate process of renewal, recreation and regeneration. He acquires a new set of transmitted powers from his father through which he constructs an adequate moral character, suitable for the position of godfather, and a new identity, worthy to represent the real discourse of the Manifest Destiny. The spirit of the underworld is not only

embodied in the ruthless family Dons and the human beasts like Luca Brasi; it also resides within Michael's unconsciousness. This is discernible in his presence that "radiates danger" as the "reincarnation of Don Corleone himself" (Puzo 112). It is also noticeable in his intuitive thinking: he is able to predict the second scheme to murder his father in his hospital bed; and he also foresees the betrayal of Tessio in the executive plan to murder him. By the end of his training, Michael hypostatizes the vicious hunter who tracks his enemies to learn their secrets and weaknesses. He designs his final series of assassinations against the mob families by knowing their exact vices, routines and location, asserting by that his dominance and regenerating the power of his family.

The encounter of Michael with the underworld creates a transcendent Narrative in which the regeneration of the self could only be achieved through violence. This violent hunt empowers Michael to secure a process of "self-renewal" and recover his denied spirit. His use of violence does not only regenerate the position of his family; it also allows a rebirth of his new identity – though the latter is conditioned by the former. The recovery of his spirit – a process his Puritan ancestors longed for – is established through a conversion and a regeneration of the self. Thus, Michael Corleone exemplifies a condensed form of the frontier experience and personifies Slotkin's mythical hunter who reigns over the cultural pattern of the Manifest Destiny.

As confirmed by Slotkin, the hunter executes his violence according to a strict code. This code has the moral function of legitimizing and redeeming violence as a necessary act to ensure the regeneration of the spirit. Among the basic constructs proposed by Slotkin in the execution of violence is the mastering of self-restraint; he explains: "[the hero] will kill only when and only so much as practical necessity requires" (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 552). Thus, a process of "legitimation," to use Lyotard's terms, is installed within the American mythogenesis. As noted, the portrayal of violence as a moral necessity atones for the ethical or psychological implications of guilt and redeems the hunter's spirit.

Michael exhibits a well-mastered self-restraint in the execution of his criminal violence. Though his code is not formally established, it is implicitly part of his enactment of violence. His violence is always justified as a moral necessity; even the murder of Tessio and Carlo are treated as a logical and mandatory action to keep the family safe. Since he is alienated from religion, Michael's self-control – in killing or in refusing to bestow mercy – is actually part of his personal process of spiritual redemption which is a necessary measure to regenerate the essence of “progress” and success. Evidently, his code is secured by the *Omerta* rule which plays two functions in the Narrative of regenerative violence; it secures the loyalty of friends through an oath of honor, and more importantly, it forbids the underworld members to ever utter the nature and details of their crimes, as Hagen explains: “there are things that have to be done and you do them and you never talk about them” (Puzo 124). Therefore, keeping violence undefined at the communicative level facilitates the personal process of regeneration.

Slotkin insists that the immersion of the Protagonist in the Universe does not entail the absolute adoption of the wilderness. The outcome is a unique American experience, originated in the wilderness, but still related to civilization in purpose and outcome. The engraved Puritan heritage of proclaimed superiority is, as previously discussed, an undeniable part of the hunter's identity which he uses to undermine and dominate the Indian, Slotkin sees him as:

the man who stands between the opposed worlds of savagery and civilization, acting sometimes as mediator or interpreter between races and cultures but more often as civilization's most effective instrument against savagery— a man who knows how to think and fight like an Indian, to turn their own methods against them. (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 16)

Thus, the hunter's assimilation of the wilderness and its ferocious forces does not negate his purpose of refining, civilizing – and if needed – exterminating the Indian. His adoption of the Other's culture is merely a practical means for him to ease his experience in the wilderness and fight the enemy from within.

Unlike his father who always distrusts the American society, Michael still longs for his return to the civil state. Although both the underworld and the American society are part of a metropolitan Universe, the former is referenced as the wilderness while the latter represents the advanced White civilization. For Michael, the American social union still stands as “the general family of humanity” (Puzo 348). Though there is no illusion about its fatal corruption and injustice, it still recalls the dream of innocence at the personal level, and the symbol of a unique civilization at the cultural level. As the representation of “humanity,” joining this “family” is, according to him, worthy of the self-sacrifice he achieves and the criminal violence he commits. His dream is to achieve a second regeneration in this upper world within the American society.

Michael’s immersion in the underworld and his metamorphosis into its brutal emperor does not cancel his claim for a crime-free life. His high esteem of the American society recalls the sense of superiority typically attached to its ancestral history. His ultimate purpose of legitimating the family business is, thus, an effort to redeem and regenerate the ‘savage’, the ‘uncivilized’ and the ‘brutal’ underworld. Case in point, Michael, as the postmodern frontier, abides by the discursive vehicles of the Manifest Destiny only to expose the state of criminal violence as part of its metanarrative.

Furthermore, the aim of legitimating the Corleone business remains a thread that recalls Michael’s “humanity”. It stipulates that he has not lost his soul to the Universe of the underworld, refusing to become a beast with no moral compass. His adoption of the underworld criminal violence is meant to fight his enemies from within and work towards his regeneration from without. As a middle man between the savagery of the underworld and the civilization of the American world, Michael mediates the two cultures; he thinks and fights like an agent of the former, but remains a faithful and effective instrument to the latter.

Michael reincarnates the quest of the hunter hero as the new Corleone frontier. A similar process is depicted in the heroic quest of Daniel Boone¹ who was at the centre of this myth in the late nineteenth century. Though he was “stained” by the wilderness, Boone refused “mixing his blood” with the “savages” or returning to the civilized world (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 279); while in between, he was able to conceive his own society which enabled him to return to his family. According to Slotkin, this completes the “trinity” of conventional entities so deeply valued in American culture: progress, loyalty and the family (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 279). Like Boone, Michael’s self-restraint allows him to control the underworld while building his own social order. His journey leads him back to the arms of his family, thereby concretizing the American “trinity” by securing progress, ensuring loyalty and prioritizing his family.

The Godfather concretizes Slotkin’s order of the frontier myth from its birth as a captivity narrative to its full maturity as the new frontier of the twentieth century. While the scholar develops an intricate analysis on the development of the frontier myth, he insists that it is engraved as a national identity through which a definite cultural archetype has been formulated in literary narratives. His shy flirt with Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* in his last volume certifies this crime saga genre as an innovative interpretation of his studies.² *The Godfather* illustrates Slotkin’s compendium on the frontier and the Manifest Destiny, while validating his claims that regeneration through violence is, indeed, a “metaphor of the American experience” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 5).

¹ Daniel Boone is a historical figure responsible for the annexation of Kentucky to the United States of America. He is considered as a source of inspiration for many authors who were prolific in depicting his experiences. Thus, Boone was considered the precursor in the creation of the archetypal American hero in American culture. According to Slotkin, James Fenimore Cooper’s hero “Natty Bumppo” in his *The Leatherstocking Tales* was based on the character and experience of Daniel Boone (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 190).

² Slotkin refers to the narrative of *The Godfather* when he mentions Cawelti’s theory of formula. He praises the “social character” of his studies and illustrates with Puzo’s oeuvre to confirm that the audience has the liberty to create its own formula. For further information, students could consult Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800- 1890*.

While Michael Corleone respects the order of the frontier experience, Tyler Durden portrays a different mythical pattern. As the Universe in *Fight Club* is offensively more industrialized, the Protagonist is psychologically more disturbed; as a result, the effects of such accelerations are reflected in the escalation of violence. Though the purpose remains statically faithful to the cause of regeneration, the target is extremely elevated to include a much more abstruse and lethal enemy.

2. The Regression of the Millennial Hunter

As previously discussed, *Fight Club* illustrates a different discourse of the Manifest Destiny which represents the invention aspect in the literary formula of the millennial age. The restoration of the subjective experience elevates the personal paradigm over the material; while the latter is not rejected in an idealistic vision, it is, nonetheless, proved to be the main momentum behind the virtuous narrative of the Manifest Destiny, causing, as such, the deterioration of the postmodern condition. As the events of the novel progress towards chaotic violence, the subjective experience evolves in nature to uncover and propose a new pattern of the Manifest Destiny.

Journeying back to Slotkin's first instances on regenerative violence as a progress of "self-renewal or self-creation through acts of violence" (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 556), *Fight Club* embodies the exact quest of renewing and re-creating the subjective, the self, and ultimately, culture; all through acts of violence. The intriguing fact remains that the narrative depicts a particular process of regression both in terms of the personal experience of the antihero and in the chronological order of the American mythogenesis, as defined by Slotkin.

As part of its devotion to the elevation of the self, *Fight Club* decimates the material barriers of the Universe to create an innovative setting in which the Protagonist could lead his process of regeneration. This new setting depicts the excess of postmodern industrialization and urbanization that alienates the self from its human essence. The new metropolitan state is intensified as an experience of hyperrealism which stands as a metaphorical Universe in the postmodern update of the Manifest Destiny. Neither wilderness nor Metropolis is

factually part of the Universe since all entities have become a swirl of meaningless simulacrum. What remains is the endless multitude of commodities resulted from economic progress, which eventually collide to simulate an elusive “copy of a copy of a copy” (Palahniuk 8).

The confrontations of the antihero in a hyperreal Universe are portrayed as an internal struggle, an inner conflict which revolves around the quest for the regeneration of culture. In *Fight Club*, the natural order is comprehensively eradicated – not simply by humanly established institutions – but by a synthetic form of reality in which existence becomes a mere “copy.” Moreover, the hyperreal Universe repudiates the human being even as an enemy, which in this setting evolves from the unhinged condition of capitalism into the corrupt forms of cultural foundations:

We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives.
We have a spiritual depression. (Palahniuk 97)

The enemy of this generation is the degenerative “culture” which has caused a depressive state of spiritual stagnation. Evidently, this spiritual war aggravates the ambiguity of an abstract conflict between the Protagonist and his Universe. The Universe, as a progressive myth-artifact, is presented in *Fight Club* as an “ever-expanding Dumpster of the human condition” (*Mr. Robot* 2015).

By the time the Universe reaches this hyperreal state, the antihero is already ingrained as the prophet of his age. Tyler represents a new archetypal pattern as the postmodern Protagonist. Slotkin considers the presence of this new figure as part of “the common day world, that part of reality which we know well” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 551). Thus, Tyler becomes a typical part of a new hyperreality that has grown more controlling and invasive, rendering his struggle more complex and challenging. In his attempt to regenerate culture, he not only regresses to wild savagery to bring back the status quo, but also proposes a re-constitution of the cultural foundations that led to this disastrous hyperrealism.

The regression from civilization to wilderness implies a reversion in the order of the American mythogenesis as crafted by Slotkin. Tyler's frontier experience moves backwards to depict the narrator first as the over-achiever of material success, the hunter and, finally, the captive. This process is designed by his alter ego to establish a reconnection with the wilderness and rewrite the whole process of the Manifest Destiny differently. As the wilderness is the symbol of cultural emanations, Tyler wants to bring humanity to the original source and remodel an enhanced version of human progress.

The narrator and his alter ego embody the spirit of Slotkin's hunter myth. Their interaction with their hyperreal Universe allows them to recreate a hunting process through which they are able to initiate their backward mythical journey. Raymond Malewitz, a professor of English at Oregon State University, believes that the narrator, in his raid for wasted liposuction fat, casts this morbid enterprise "in terms that resonate with violent frontier mythology" (Malewitz 530). Indeed, the narrator, while leading his fight against one form of "rugged consumerism," considers this dualistic assignment as a hunting mission: "We're a hunting party, and we're hunting for fat" (Palahniuk 97). This provides a postmodern reinterpretation of the hunter narrative in which the enemy is reincarnated in consumerist trivialities. While the narrator converts his urban life into an experience of wilderness through anarchist mischief, his alter ego's plans are more extreme. Tyler's experience as the hunter antihero outgrows the limits of personal defiance and extends as violent anarchy through Project Mayhem.

Slotkin believes that the concept of progress in America requires a "particular form or scenario of violent action" (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 11). This is traced back to the Puritan experience and its process of "spiritual regeneration" by practicing violence against the enemy. As a "central" Narrative in the American mythogenesis, the Protagonist must cross the Universe of the "Indian country" and experience a "regression" to a more primitive and natural condition of life, so that false values of the "metropolis" can be purged and a new purified social contract enacted. (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 14). Slotkin explains how violence aims at the "redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be

achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or “natural” state, and *regeneration through violence*” (Slotkin, *Gunfighter 12* – His italics).

The wisdom behind the reevaluation of the “Social Contract” philosophy is sourced in the 17th – 18th century Enlightenment, when theories on the relationship between people and government were being questioned. These theories began by investigating the State of Nature in which people lived together prior to the creations of governments and civilizations. The term “State of Nature” was first invented by English philosopher Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* (1651) to denote a primitive land deserted from all forms of civil refinements, where there is no place for “industry... no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities... no instruments... no knowledge... no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society” (Hobbes XIII). More importantly, in this barren state, human beings live in a “continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes XIII). Thus, humans, being inherently selfish and wicked, create a crude state of utter chaos and brutality when left to their own devices. In this state of “war of all against all,” Hobbes asserts that people should willingly surrender their freedom in exchange for security and protection provided by a “Leviathan” leader,¹ a tyrant, authoritative and invincible ruler who could control people’s violent and destructive impulses; this Leviathan could take the form of a monarch, a strong dictator or a government.

Hobbes’ fatalistic prospects are opposed by English philosopher John Locke who believes that people are born as what he calls the “Tabula Rasa;” translated as the “Blank Slate.” Contrary to Hobbes, Locke denies violence and destructive tendencies as an innate condition of human nature. In his *Second Treatises of Government* (1690), Locke defines the State of Nature as “a state of perfect freedom” where people are free to “order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons... A state also of equality, wherein all the power

¹ For further reading on Hobbes’ moral and political philosophies, students could consult Sharon Lloyd and Susanne Sreedhar on <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=hobbes-moral>

and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another” (Locke 5). Optimistically, Locke believes that people, if left to their own devices, are able to create a peaceful social contract while ensuring the freedom of each member in their society. Thus, the State of Nature is the harmonious interaction of inherently virtuous individuals who, collectively, create their own government that suits their needs and secures their liberties.

Hobbes’ pessimistic views of the State of Nature are also contradicted by French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Beaming during the Enlightenment period; Rousseau elaborated two distinctive social contract theories. In his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750), commonly known as the *First Discourse*, he argues that civilization corrupted the State of Nature in which the Savage Man was virtuous and happy. He confirms: “the sciences and arts owe their birth to our vices; we would be less in doubt as to their benefits, if they owed their birth to our virtues” (Rousseau, *First* 56). In the natural state, the human kind was more virtuous without the refinements provided by sciences and arts. The progress of civilization was a result of pride and vanity that “corrupted morality” and eroded the true sense of happiness (Rousseau, *First* 65).

In his *Discourse upon the Origins and Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind* (1753), also known as the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau traces the evolution of human kind from a State of Nature to modern society. The State of Nature was characterized by peaceful tranquility where human beings “lived free, healthy, honest and happy, as much as their nature would admit, and continued to enjoy with each other all the pleasures of an independent intercourse” (Rousseau, *Second* 120). People led uncomplicated lives in complete harmony with nature; their interactions were free from competition, conflict or fear. They had the innate capacity to exhibit pity and compassion for one another, creating harmless bonds between nature and each other.

Tyler would crystallize a unique millennial Manifest Destiny, converting his “urban life into a frontier experience of civilization blended with wilderness” (Malewitz, *Regeneration* 530). The antihero, through his plans of demolishing culture, endeavors to reset civilization, re-explore the original state of wilderness

and rebuild the State of Nature. Like Rousseau, Tyler confesses to the corruption of civilization in preserving the dignity of the planet. His motto of self-destruction – in which “hitting bottom” could lead to a personal resurrection – is elevated as the new Manifest Destiny that could regenerate cultural existence. The “remission” process will sanction a re-discovery of the wilderness in its State of Nature, allowing the recovery of earth, the reconnection with subjectivity and the re-instatement of cultural patterns. Thus, Tyler presents a new frontier experience in which he attempts to convert the hyperreal Metropolis into a primitive state of wilderness; this regression recalls the Puritan seed of an idealistic regeneration in a virgin land for spiritual transcendence.

The end result of Project Mayhem is the regeneration of culture by recrudescing to the State of Nature, which Tyler paints as a euphoric state, echoing the intellectual philosophy of Rousseau:

You'll hunt elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center, and dig clams next to the skeleton of the Space Needle leaning at a forty-five-degree angle. We'll paint the skyscrapers with huge totem faces and goblin tikis, and every evening what's left of mankind will retreat to empty zoos and lock itself in cages as protection against bears and big cats and wolves that pace and watch us from outside the cage bars at night. (Palahniuk 78)

As the spirit of Mother Earth is regenerated, men live in harmony with nature and among themselves. As civilization – in its architectural and leisure forms – corrupts the essence of man, he depicts his vision of the State of Nature as the return to Rousseau's optimistic views of virtue and happiness for all, repairing what civilization tarnished, overpowering its forms and regaining nature's original position of strength and harmony. Tyler's utopia would stipulate the execution of Locke's collective spirit in the selection of authoritative figures. In a harmonious State of Nature, freedom and equality are confirmed by Locke to be important predispositions that ensure the establishment of a fair social contract.

Tyler's return to the wilderness depicts another regression in his social contract philosophy. To execute his destiny of regeneration, he first tackles the human agent of the degenerative culture; the space monkeys: “Every time we do

these little homework assignments,” Tyler says, “these fight club men with nothing to lose are a little more invested in Project Mayhem” (Palahniuk 108). Under the pretence of liberation, Tyler secures his position as God, paternal figure and, finally, a leviathan leader. Shifting emphasis from the trivial object to the human target, his interaction with his followers is an “interaction... of the hunt” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 551). He tracks them and learns their most profound secrets, including their denied dreams and ambitions. By presenting destruction as a noble cause, he hunts down more men and enrolls them in his project of regeneration.

Tyler’s intention, however, is to enslave these men as “space monkeys.” He regresses from the idealistic vision of Rousseau and Locke, to incarnate Hobbes’ Leviathan leader who maintains total control over his subjects: “We have to show these men and women freedom by enslaving them, and show them courage by frightening them” (Palahniuk 97). Through no fair selection, Tyler preaches a philosophy of regression from freedom to enslavement, from virtue to tyranny. Thus, as Tyler becomes a “legend” throughout the country, converting more men into a state of anarchy and collecting a clump of human sacrifices, he reincarnates the new discourse of the hunter myth in the hyperreal world. As the hunter Protagonist in the American mythogenesis, he subjugates these men under his will to ensure his complete dominance over them.

According to the pattern hereabout, Tyler is within reach to represent the millennial hunter Protagonist. The last predicament in his journey remains the “spiritual redemption” in his use of violence. Having set the prerequisite of human sacrifice as a noble necessity to achieve this regeneration, Tyler imposes chaotic violence as a consequential and inevitable fatality: “Tyler told the Assault Committee. And just so you don't worry about it, yes, you're going to have to kill someone” (Palahniuk 79). His violence is practiced in a chaotic and autocratic form which does not respond to the code of moral restraints in the Manifest Destiny.

Tyler's regeneration through violence plays a redemptive role at the personal level but fails to reach the American cultural discourse. While his violence allows him to emerge as the narrator's savior, its moral justifications are sustained by a redemptive form of violence which takes another mythical role in the narrative.¹ According to theologian Walter Wink, redemptive violence requires a divine-like devotion. It often demands from its devotees "an absolute obedience unto- death," rendering human sacrifice the most sincere gesture to its forms (Wink 42). As peace could only be achieved through war, redemptive violence is meant to serve the "inner spirituality" of an entire nation. Though he fails in this endeavor, Tyler, through his extremist plans, is devoted to redeem, not only himself but a whole generation of worthless humans.

Tyler desperately attempts to secure his violence with a code of secrecy: "The first rule about fight club is you don't talk about fight club. The second rule about fight club," Tyler yells, "is you don't talk about fight club" (Palahniuk 28); "the first rule about Project Mayhem is you don't ask questions about Project Mayhem" (Palahniuk 104). As soon as this code is breached, the purpose of Project Mayhem is disqualified, which explains why Tyler had instilled confidentiality as the first and second rule of fight club and Project Mayhem: "You talked about me to other people, you little shit. You broke your promise...I can't believe you broke your promise. The first rule is you don't talk about fight club" (Palahniuk 106). Defining violence at the communicative level obstructs the personal process of regeneration. Suddenly, human sacrifice – especially that of Robert Paulson – anarchy, chaos and violence become overbearing for the narrator.

¹ In his *The Powers that Be* (1999), Wink believes that redemptive violence is restored as the "oldest continuously repeated stories in the world" (Wink 42). It is sourced in a Babylonian myth in which Marduk, patron of deities, murders and dismembers Tiamat, goddess of the sea, and creates the world from her cadaver, implying that chaos precedes order in human creation. Despite its mythical background, Wink asserts that it is still relevant in modern times as an inevitable and casual nature of things and as the "real myth of the modern world" (Wink 42).

As soon as the narrator grows uncomfortable with the uncontrollable use of violence, Tyler disappears. This disappearance announces the narrator's backward journey from insanity to sanity: "Tyler Durden is a separate personality I've created, and now he's threatening to take over my real life" (Palahniuk 129). The narrator's backward journey is achieved as the "birth of a twice-born ego" (Campbell, *Myths* 149). The fact that he could still have a direct conversation with Tyler proves that he is still within the manifestations of schizophrenia; nonetheless, he is finally able to discern the reality of his condition and diagnose his disease. His next course of action would be an attempt to salvage the damage he has caused by dissolving Project Mayhem.

Once the backward journey is activated, a severe animosity is born between the narrator and Tyler. Ironically, while the physical entity remains whole, the two parts of consciousness manifest the psychological awareness through two different characters:

"Every time you fall asleep," Tyler says, "I run off and do something wild, something crazy, something completely out of my mind.

...

"I said that if you talked about me behind my back, you'd never see me again," Tyler said. "We're not two separate men. Long story short, when you're awake, you have the control, and you can call yourself anything you want, but the second you fall asleep, I take over, and you become Tyler Durden." (Palahniuk 108)

The "return" of the schizophrenic, according to Campbell, carries "the energies of an archetypal instinct system into fruitful play in a contemporary space-time daylight situation" (Campbell, *Myths* 149). The war between the narrator and his alter ego creates the classic characteristics of a rivalry between a hero and a villain. Slotkin confirms that the notion of "doubleness" is an essential part of the myth of the hunter. According to him, the hunter will "fight the enemy on his own terms and in his own manner, becoming in the process a reflection or double of his dark opponent" (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 573). The hunter's encounter with the darkness of his enemy would eventually intrude his own soul to become part of his reflection. He adds: "the struggle turns inward: Indians are discovered lurking in subversive forces within society itself, in the independence and

aspirations of one's own children, in the recesses of one's own mind” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 564). The return to sanity immediately creates a notion of “doubleness” between the two parts of the mind. Harboring a dark force that lurked within him all along, Tyler becomes the ‘savage’ Indian; his position shifts from the antihero Protagonist – tracing the new millennial archetypal pattern – to the brutal opponent with no moral compass in the American mythogenesis.

In contrast, the sane narrator claims the role of the archetypal hero in the captivity myth who has to save the innocent victims that would fall during the explosion. His heroism is revived as a culturally inherited “archetypal instinct;” and as a typical heroic performance, he executes a form of self sacrifice by shooting himself in the mouth and killing Tyler. The frontier experience must abide by the legitimizing metanarratives in which violence must face the issue of morality, especially in American literary fiction. Thus, the plot resumes the classical formula of the American hero who must preserve his image as a savior and his mission of regenerating the world through civilized means. This reinstates Slotkin’s claims of the American mythical hero acting as “civilization’s most effective instrument against savagery” (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 16).

In a detailed online article entitled “I Am Jack's Raging Bile Duct:" *Fight Club* and the American Mythology of Violence in the Postmodern Moment,”¹ Robin Freed, a professor from the University of Virginia, elaborates on *Fight Club* under Richard Slotkin’s insights on the frontier myth and concludes that:

By reworking the myth of regeneration through violence, *Fight Club* emerges as a contestation of the lengths that men will go to in order to truly feel alive in a society that has dulled their senses. Violence is posited as a solution or redemption, but ultimately violence is not the answer. (Freed, *Postmodernism and Violence*)

¹ This is an e-text; therefore, page number is not available.

Becoming the embodiment of the savage Indian, Tyler's fanatic ambitions cloud his judgment and interfere with the conclusion of his mythical journey. He tampers with the strict code with which the hunter Protagonist controls his violence through moral restraints and practical necessity.

The Manifest Destiny enrolls the frontier hero to redeem and regenerate humanity from its degenerate state. Tyler attempts to duplicate this aim by recreating cultural structures and reestablishing a new world order. Nevertheless, the use of violence as an abhorred obligation is overruled by Tyler who imposes it as a casual consequence of historical revolutions; consequently, it remains at the personal level, representing the disenchantment of unhinged, unworthy and unappreciated "space monkeys." Even his plan to demolish the museum fails as he mixes the vitro with paraffin, tanking the entire operation of destruction. To this extent, it is acknowledged that "violence does not get the protagonist anywhere nor does it earn him anything" (Freed, *Postmodernism and Violence*).

In her "A Hero Will Rise: The Myth of the Fascist Man in "Fight Club" and Gladiator," Jennifer Barker believes that the violence used in *Fight Club* serves the purpose of aesthetics and negates "democratic representation" to solve complex historical and political issues. This makes the represented violence as un-spiritual as it is useless, resulting in a fascist and unrealistic purpose of creating the "mythical rebirth" of the nation. Trivializing human sacrifice, chaos and anarchy, Tyler's mission of regeneration through violence does not respect its mythical boundaries and, thus, fails to attain the discourse of the American mythogenesis.

Since Michael Corleone follows the inscribed regulations of the Manifest Destiny, his experience as the frontier hunter is identifiable by the American audience. His journey encompasses the historical and cultural conventions that constituted the American frontier myth. Tyler Durden, for his part, astounds the audience with his regression process. While the elements of his journey are clearly recognized as American archetypes, the backward direction – which entails more extreme use of violence – is considered as an invention, growing progressively in public imagination. The frontier journey between the convention

of *The Godfather* and the invention of *Fight Club* creates a formula of violence between progression and retrogression in popular culture.

III. The Formula of Violence between Progression and Retrogression

In his *Violence in American Literature* (1966), cultural historian David Brion confirms that the representation of violence in literature goes back to biblical stories, myths and common tales. Brion believes that these narratives were thought to be either “illusions or instruments of class oppression” (Brion 35); however, when human civility overturned myths and ignorance, it was clear that violence was part and parcel of human nature.¹ Brion carries on: “man was found to be an irrational animal, moved by deep, destructive impulses which were either irresistible or were self-expressive, and, therefore, creative” (Brion 35). Thus, violence is part of man’s basic nature and acts as a brutal force for his expressive and creative needs. Evidently, historical records of human massive genocides, the First World War and the Second World War confirm that violence is indeed a main theme in life.

Violence enjoys a significant momentum in America for it has dominated American literature for “more than one hundred and sixty years” (Brion 28). From canonical to popular texts, violence, as a raw theme, runs through the tales of James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, Ambrose Bierce, Stephen Crane, and Jack London. For one reason or another, Brion believes, the mass American audience thrives on literature of violence (Brion 30). The scholar elaborates on the different forms the transcript of violence could take to reflect upon the American lived reality. To cite a few, violence could represent the “real nature” of class struggle: In Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape*, Yank’s violent suicide voices an agonizing social repression caused by the process of industrialization with the control of the upper class. Violence could also symbolize the “puncturing of dreams and illusions:” In Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, the murder of Jay Gatsby represents the violent outburst of his own idealistic ambitions (Brion 35). In any case, for a nation “conceived in violence,” the

¹ Cawelti also believes that violence takes an important place in the human being’s heart; even when he is a naturally peaceful and law-abiding citizen; this is due to “some basic trait which, among other things, manifests itself in a fascination with tales of crime” (Cawelti, *The New Mythology* 326).

treatment of this violence is increasingly imposing itself in literary narratives; all to the pleasure of people who “profess to believe in peace and human brotherhood” (Brion 36).

Evidently, it would be “naïve” to conclude that this frequency is a reflection of an abnormally violent society. Though the appeal to violence is part of human nature, such hasty conclusion should not reflect a societal diagnosis. A more engaging view would conclude that violence in American literature reflects certain “historical conditions and circumstances” (Brion 30). A tentative observation could relate fictional violence to the American social and cultural pattern; as Professor emeritus of psychology Halford Fairchild states: “Violence is a pandemic in America” (Fairchild 12). Several arguments come to light to explain the reasons behind America’s adherence to violence. In fact, violence, as perceived by the Americans, is not restricted to historical events of war and anarchy, or civil divergences like gun violence and rape; rather, it is a concept deeply rooted in their culture, functioning as a dynamic discourse in their society. This implies that violence is part of their national myth, acting as a unifying factor in the construction of the American character and identity.

In a compelling online essay entitled “De-civilization in the 1960s,” psychologist Steven Pinker assesses “the flood of violence” that erupted in that period from the political scene to everyday life. According to him, the rebounding violence in the 1960s was unexpected as the country was booming with economic growth, near full employment, historical racial progress and governmental social programs. He believes that the surge of violence is due to “a kind of intergenerational de-civilizing process”¹ (Pinker, *De-civilization*) in which the new generation attempted to disassociate itself from the conventional social forms and distinguish itself by momentum opposition in the process of creating their own “civilizing process.”

¹This is an e-text; therefore, page number is not available.

The harsh scrutiny towards power structures – political or cultural – often culminated in violence to denounce the generational dissatisfaction with conventionally imposed discourses. An amalgamation of currents pushed against the “civilizing tide” which was proudly celebrated in the era’s popular culture. Violence – at the personal or public scale – was depicted in new music genres and invaded the plots of popular novels and films. From all societal levels, violence dominated the spirit of the sixties as war in all its forms was waged against the past.

The end of the twentieth century seems to depict the end result of the process of “de-civilization” as the generational outcome is completely disconnected from the past. According to American critic and author Barry Keith Grant, within the “extraordinary preeminence of violence in the extreme alienation of late twentieth-century America,” there has been “an acceptance of violent imagery and narrative in postmodernity” (Grant 10). Grant assumes that this mundane treatment of violence is due to the “postmodern procession of simulacra” where traditional images of violence “have lost their affective power, and consequently have been replaced by a more neutral style” (Grant 24). Thus, as the process of simulacrum progresses to the late twentieth-century America, the audience had accepted violence as part of their national discourse and had disregarded all moral and ethical implications related to its practice.

American cultural critic Nicolaus Mills asserts that in the 1990s, violence became a “state of mind, the product of a culture of spite and cruelty that has had an enormous impact on us” (Mills 2). The closure of the twentieth century engraved violence from within as an inner manifestation of cultural identity. Mills continues:

Central to the new meanness, as well as distinguishing it from the confident Reaganism of the 1980's, is our feeling that we are no longer a coherent nation bound together by our past... our enemies are no longer clearly defined by the Cold War... the result has been an opportunity, seemingly boundless in its possibilities, for turning inward. This new savagery is not simply the reflection of an underclass frustrated by hard times. It is also part of a middle-class culture that in recent years has seemed more and more at home with violence. (Mills 19)

The past represents a referential pillar that bounds one nation and allows its historical progress; it is an obelisk which conjoins identity pieces and provides meaning under a cultural cocoon. With the loss of this pedestal, a state of primal violence emerges from within to manifest a cultural frustration, and this savagery is often accepted as ‘the new normal’ of the middle-class culture. Jameson joins Mills in explaining the disappearance of a sense of history as the “way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions” (Jameson 11). Therefore, the generation’s disconnectedness with the past causes a severe fraction of the individual’s inner state.

The outstanding genius of both Puzo and Palahniuk resides in their efforts to remedy the contextual conflict by proposing a reconnection with the past. *The Godfather* communicates the essence of several conventional myths that send the audience to the backbone of their culture. Evidently, Puzo rewrites these generic conventions through an exposed form of denunciation against the injustices of the Manifest Destiny, targeted to the “less naive, more politicized temper of the time” (Cawelti, *The Six* 244). Similarly, Palahniuk’s invention consists of revisiting The Manifest Destiny as a conventional myth and diagnosing its defective seeds. By shifting focus to the inward, *Fight Club* proposes a reattachment to the past; but an immaculate and restructured past that ensures the harmony of a new social contract. As this prospect is well targeted, violence in both narratives is conceived as “the war to end all wars;”¹ the final outlet that regenerates the self and either ensures a continuity of conventions or creates a set of disruptive inventions.

To make his novel abide by the metanarrative of the Manifest Destiny which deems violence as a moral necessity, Puzo legitimizes his narrative through the act of self-sacrifice. He appeals to the sympathy of the audience by treating violence in an unconventional and “more complex fashion.” Michael

¹ “The war to end all wars” was an idealistic slogan originally used by Woodrow Wilson. It has since infiltrated the slang of popular culture to denote the necessity of destruction to ensure peace.

does not represent the conventional villain which usually dominates western and hard-boiled detective genres; instead, he is the model of ambiguous morality in the genre of gangster saga. In his analysis of *The Godfather*, Cawelti confirms:

The violent actions in which Michael Corleone becomes progressively involved are presented to us as moral necessities required by the endemic corruption and brutality of a fundamentally unjust society... Michael Corleone stands out like Shane as a man who has achieved complete self-integration by sacrificing himself to violence for the sake of the peace and prosperity of those he loves and feels responsible for. (Cawelti, *Myths* 528)

Indeed, the purpose of Michael's sacrifice makes him more sympathetic in the eyes of the American audience. The desire for this type of literary figures reveals an important change of perception; it suggests a "desire for the heroic remains, but one that is devoid of its typical, grandiloquent trappings" (Simmons 06). Thus, the context of the sixties still depicts the convention of heroism based on consequential self-sacrifice, but without the glorifying and pretentious heroic discourse. *The Godfather* presents the readers with a new type of antihero who exhibits a naked truth about success, progress, divinity and violence in America. This reflects the audience's desire and need for a new type of leader to guide them, by all means, to the destiny they dream of.

Evidently, the purpose of legitimizing violence in *The Godfather* relates to the audience's acceptance of the literary work. Cawelti believes that the audience's reception of a narrative and their likes and dislikes about it reveal certain peculiarities about their backgrounds. The audience needs a moral justification in order to relate to the narrative; as a result, the surge of crime genres, more particularly, gangster fiction usually contains background stories of social injustice and racial inequality.

The antiheroes' practice of violence between the two narratives creates a formula that reflects important changes to both popular culture and its audience. Puzo's *The Godfather* seems to reminisce about a conventional consciousness of American success and progress. The audience, though appreciative of his brutal honesty, still communicates with the essence of Michael's mission. His hard

work and self-sacrifice for the purpose of integrating American society and saving future generations echo a sense of heroism which still weighs in the American popular imagination. With a determined mind and an intact consciousness, Michael represents the new rebel archetype of the sixties that would crystallize the real aim of the Manifest Destiny.

Unlike Puzo who makes his antihero trace his path according to the norms of heroic sacrifice, Palahniuk aims at the reconfiguration of America's approach to violence. *Fight Club* presents another vision which tackles the heart of societal and cultural deficiencies. By destroying the symbol of culture through unlegitimized chaotic designs, Tyler's violence reveals a radical change in the popular imagination. Offering the restructuring of social paradigm through the primitive and literal form of human sacrifice attracts the admiration – and at times – support of the audience. Tyler embodies a new millennial archetype that rises from the ashes of his own destruction. Thus, the shift from an antihero who regenerates success to an antihero who regenerates humanity is reflective of a society that has lost hope in the conventional principles of hard work and self sacrifice, and would rather focus on saving humanity from its fatal disintegration.

The essence of the portrayed violence is framed within a personalized interpretation of the Manifest Destiny. American popular culture continuously proposes new contexts that revoke and reassess the discourses of national myths. The myth of “regeneration through violence” is a responsive cultural terrain which survives the historical transformations of the twentieth century (Mazur 122). This myth infiltrates popular films and television genres through creative inventions that interchangeably preserve cultural conventions. According to Polish historian Zbigniew Mazur, the wilderness in a postmodern context is represented by “the West, a criminal underworld, or a post-apocalyptic zombie land,” in which the Protagonist “succeeds only when he commits some violent acts” (Mazur 122). Thus, the complexity of modern social and cultural structures provides a multitude of settings in which the antihero, as a leading figure, enacts his regenerative violence which, in contrast, remains a constant myth-archetype as part of the American national identity.

Slotkin asserts the position of the Protagonist in building a uniquely American national myth. This mission requires him to be “reliable” in generating an identification bond between him and the audience (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 268). The Protagonist allows the audience to relate to the Narrative which condenses different past experiences. Since the frontier myth congregates the American past as it evokes the Puritans’ quest of regeneration, captivity narratives and the hunter hero, it allows the audience to identify this mythical journey and relate to its premise. Slotkin confirms: “[the hero’s] initiation into the wilderness becomes the reader’s own experience, as each chapter ... carries him deeper into the wilderness, into a more intimate knowledge...” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 272). Thus, by representing the past, the American audience shares the Protagonist’s quest of regeneration of the self and forms with him a union under one national myth.

Both Michael and Tyler communicate the essence of the American frontier myth and, by extension, the myth of the Manifest Destiny. The American audience is able to identify with their experience which condenses various past scenarios. Michael’s mythical journey compresses the Puritan quest of regeneration of the self, a captivity plot and a hunting experience. Thus, the American audience forms a cultural bond with the mythical spirit of his path. Like Michael, Tyler transmits the same archetypal elements in his hunting adventures, captivity struggle and quest for the regeneration of culture. Though his process is reversed, it still carries the audience members through the historical heritage that reinforced their American identity.

To contextualize the frontier experience, Slotkin traces its development throughout the twentieth century. He emphasizes the sixties as the period that witnessed the surge of the “New Frontier” in popular culture. This new Protagonist considers “war” as “a primary symbol” of political, social and cultural value (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 499). In the American frontier society, there must be a person in charge of imposing “a semblance of justice and order” (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 500). This “mythology of war” emphasizes the necessity of

violence in the political and social arena, and it is often reflected in artistic and cultural representations.

Slotkin confirms that this Protagonist feels a sense of responsibility and empowerment to act beyond the restrictive laws imposed on him by the System. Ergo, he considers himself a representative agent for people's will (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 505). The New Frontier is characterized by his fevering belief in sacrifice for the sake of honor, regenerating by that the medieval code with a "modern and liberal inflection" (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 506). More importantly, the New Frontier is still inclined to choose violence as a regenerative means to effectuate his sacrifice. The "proclivity to violence" is, according to Slotkin, a "brutalizing effect" of the Indian wars (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 557).

The American audience identifies with the progression of Michael Corleone as the New Frontier who regenerates the essence of the Manifest Destiny through violence. The war against the underworld and the American system empowers him with a political and social position as the new godfather and with a cultural value as the New Frontier of the American mythogenesis. By legitimating his violence, the audiences respect his individual system of justice and order as it only emphasizes the failure of their democratic institutions in securing their personal liberties. Michael becomes a symbol of free will; his sense of responsibility towards his family – which the audience remains nostalgic for – enables him to act beyond the restrictive laws imposed on him. He modernizes the medieval code of self-sacrifice to emerge as a New American Frontier who sacrifices his life to perpetuate a postmodern Manifest Destiny.

Unlike Puzo who conventionally allows his Protagonist to progress as the New Frontier archetype of the sixties, Palahniuk regresses with his frontier experience to the myth of the hunter of the early colonists. His reinterpretation of the hunter myth in a postmodern context emphasizes the colossal end results of the Manifest Destiny, and proposes a reevaluation of the cultural paradigms that have led to the disintegration of humanity. The retrogression from civility to savagery accentuates the urgent need to reconsider the structural foundation of the American society. The invention of Palahniuk resides in regressing to the

natural state of human existence where the return to the primitive State of Nature restores the equilibrium between men and makes all divisions return to ground zero.

Tyler's failure to resume his mythical journey reflects the audience's perceptions on regeneration based on chaos and anarchy. Most of critical criticisms about *Fight Club* is centered on violence as an individual expression against the decentralized and consumer driven postmodern culture. Though *Fight Club* generates a common formula which pokes at the regeneration of American culture through violence, it is rarely viewed by critics within the frames of the Manifest Destiny. This proves that Tyler's violence does not communicate with the American audience at the cultural level; rather, it remains at the level of intimate experiences of postmodern disenchantment. With no attempts to legitimize his brutality, Tyler agitates and confronts the American audiences who are forced to face the realities of their inherited violence.

The pattern of the schizophrenic hero and his villain alter ego who try to restore cultural paradigms has become quite common in recent popular works. On the one hand, this emphasizes the psychological distortion of postmodern men in the maze of technological inventions; on the other hand, the resort to chaotic violence is a concept that the audience seems to flirt with but with a preserved caution. This hesitation is almost always depicted by the antihero's return to reasoning. Hence, the protagonist, such as the narrator, wakes up from his delusion to salvage the damage his alter ego has caused. His shift from antihero to hero symbolizes the feeling of skepticism towards the unknown designs of chaos and anarchy. It could also be interpreted as a nostalgic attachment to the traditional hero archetype that America is built upon and could not completely eradicate from its culture.

A similar pattern of the protagonist's struggle between reason and anarchy is seen in Sam Ismail's TV series *Mr. Robot* (2015). As the television series present a more recent disintegration of the postmodern man, it joins the formula of the schizophrenic narrator and his alter ego. The narrative presents Eliot Alderson, a cyber security engineer who struggles with social anxiety, identity

disorder and clinical depression; he eventually develops schizophrenia and unconsciously leads a double life. His alter ego takes the form of an anarchist known as “Mr. Robot.”¹ Eliot and Mr. Robot create an activist group called “F society” which aims at starting a revolution by destroying the financial data of E Corp, the largest conglomerate in the world; nevertheless, when Eliot witnesses the magnitude of chaos in his revolution, he realizes his slip on consciousness and leads a battle against Mr. Robot to shut down F society. Like the narrator, Eliot reclaims the role of the hero and fights the enemy that is his own alter ego. The return to reality is, in this case, a skeptical reaction to the descent to chaos for the regeneration of humanity.

Hence, the formula of regeneration through violence between convention and invention is portrayed by a process of progression and retrogression. *The Godfather* simulates the conventional pattern of the frontier experience to regenerate the highly appreciated American Manifest Destiny. *Fight Club*, for its part, introduced an invention to the frontier experience that questions the entire structure of the Manifest Destiny. By regressing from the figurative sense to the literal sense of sacrifice and from civility to savagery, violence is amplified from the personal to the cultural experience, insinuating a more colossal destructive operation. While the American audience is clearly attracted to this new significance of violence, it is still approached with precautionary hesitation.

The myth of regeneration through violence still generates powerful formulas in popular culture. Slotkin confirms that this myth is a permanent artifact that infiltrates all American narratives throughout history with “a new captivity, a new hunt and a new ceremony of exorcism [that] repeat the myth-scenario on a progressively deeper, more internal level” (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 565). Indeed, as the postmodern condition is aggravated by the intrusive technological advancement, the frontier experience is reclaimed under new artifacts that ultimately expose more profound inner conflicts. In the current twenty first century, this myth is enacted through the “electronic frontier,” which

¹ The character of “Mr. Robot” is also the personification of Eliot’s father which could emphasize the hypothesis of the ghostly father previously discussed in Chapter Three.

could also be exemplified by the hitherto mentioned series *Mr. Robot*. Helen McLure, from the University of Texas, defines him as the “e-frontier” and states that: “the e-frontier can be a harsh and even dangerous territory, a perfect breeding ground for both outlaws and vigilantes” (McLure 416). The “e-frontier” builds upon the frontier myth to explore a highly digitalized world and often resorts to violence in an attempt to tame its “cybenated” tools; either to regenerate his human sensibilities at the personal level, or to tentatively rejuvenate his entire culture. Thus, to reinsert Wink’s claims, the issue of violence remains the “ethos” of modern times, engraved as the permanent “spirituality” of the American world.

Reenacting the frontier experience in postmodern times discloses violence as an essential element of the Manifest Destiny. Whereas the American discourse of perfectibility stipulates that the Manifest Destiny “redeems and remakes” the world – affirming that the resort to violence is a moral necessity to achieve this honorable mission, – popular culture delegitimizes this utopian narrative. By acknowledging brutality as an ingrained seed in the American mythogenesis, Michael Corleone and Tyler Durden prove the importance and significance of violence in achieving, perpetuating and regenerating the Manifest Destiny.

To conclude with, this chapter investigated the cultural dimensions of violence under the American frontier experience. It ultimately aimed at inspecting the state of violence, viewed as redeeming and regenerating under the metanarrative of the Manifest Destiny. This was first tracked through the antihero’s practices to denounce the shift in essence that occurred to the concept of violence in both narratives. *The Godfather* remained faithful to the process of legitimating criminal violence under the noble act of self-sacrifice for the general good; this provided a subtle justification that permitted the brutal state of violence. As an obedient subject to the power of the Manifest Destiny, Puzo’s antihero reenacts the frontier myth and follows its evolution in his personal perspicacity. His regeneration of traditional mores of progress and success through criminal violence echoes a conventional discourse to the American audience who remains in awe for his courage in manifesting his own destiny. As

the reincarnation of the hunter Protagonist, Michael Corleone secures his position as the New Frontier of early postmodern America.

Fight Club proposed a revision of the past in the hope of conceiving a more human future. The narrative's treatment of the postmodern condition entails a process of complete regression to the status quo. Initiating his backward process, the antihero started by revisiting the primitive sense of human sacrifice to enact his designed form of chaotic violence. His philosophy of destruction dispensed all causes of justification and stipulated instead the exaltation of chaos and violence. Pursuing his regressive journey, Tyler emulated a rearward progress in the order of the Manifest Destiny to propose a reevaluation of cultural foundations that could heal postmodern disintegration. Evidently, his adherence to the regeneration of culture through violence astounds the American audiences who remain reluctant to accept this factual part of their national and historical identity.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the resisting current of popular culture in its endeavors to delegitimize the metanarrative of the Manifest Destiny. This process was established through the evolution of the antiheroic model, from a criminal antihero depicted by Michael Corleone to a psychologically deranged antihero represented by Tyler Durden. The findings of this research highlighted the meticulous scrutiny Puzo and Palahniuk led against American culture. By making the concept of “Destiny” the highest authority in their novels, both authors were able to dismantle the discourse of American perfectibility. In tackling the three elements of virtue, divine culling and regenerative frontier that constitute the Manifest Destiny, Michael and Tyler uncovered its criminal, unholy and violent manifestations. The formula engendered by these two antiheroes reflected a more radical attitude in delegitimizing this myth; while Michael sacrificed his soul to crime and violence to manifest a ‘true’ American destiny, Tyler Durden attempted to reconstitute all of its elements to amend his distorted reality.

According to Lyotard, the search for “legitimation” – which defines the function of all knowledge forms – has a “natural tendency” to arrive at the point of “delegitimation” (Lyotard 39). Evidently, this explains why Puzo’s efforts to legitimize the Corleone family under American conventions resulted in the “delegitimation” of the Manifest Destiny. It is both paradoxical and unexpected how *The Godfather*, an Italian-American gangster novel, accurately portrayed the realities limned in the American Manifest Destiny. The investigation followed the path of its protagonist, Michael Corleone, to trail his adherence to American cultural norms. His desperation to fulfill a ‘virtuous’ American destiny consistently led him to expose its concealed side. The narrative of “virtue” was, thusly, interpreted as an unethical struggle for capitalist success secured through violence, crime and murder. Through Michael’s enforced path of violence, the disguise of a ‘virtuous’ Manifest Destiny eroded under a straightforward depiction of an American enterprise of crime. Puzo’s genius resides in his

implicit efforts to legitimize this Mafia transgression business by swaddling the Corleones in a conventional metanarrative of Manifest Destiny.

Palahniuk, for his part, related *Fight Club* to the Manifest Destiny through an ambivalent attitude of nihilism and hopeful idealism. While the psychological state of the unnamed narrator accentuated the effects of consumerist capitalism, his alter ego, Tyler Durden, hoped to destroy this materialistic aspect to focus on the restoration of the subjective experience. It was demonstrated how his efforts of delegitimizing the ‘virtuous’ narrative of the Manifest Destiny escalated into a philosophy of destruction. Through Tyler’s designed path of violence, the Manifest Destiny is challenged by an antihero who, in his own naïve and illusory state, wished to reconstruct its pillars and introduce more humane aspects into its narratives. Palahniuk shattered the metanarrative of Manifest Destiny in an attempt to reconstitute its elements and heal the postmodern hyper-culture.

In delegitimizing the narrative of divine election – which strengthens the Manifest Destiny as a unique experience blessed by God, – *The Godfather* portrayed the Corleones as the Apotheosis Family, leading an unholy destiny of sins in America. The immoral path of Michael Corleone was traced to examine his repudiation of the divine order. Puzo portrayed the ambivalence of a secular nation that presumes to be leading a holy destiny. By depicting a subtle transition of power from the Father to the Son, while immersing them both in an inherited enterprise of crime, the author exposed a sacrilegious Manifest Destiny in which the state of violence was both a means and an end to achieve a sacred American dream of capitalist success.

Fight Club, for its part, escalated the endeavors of delegitimizing the religious narrative of the Manifest Destiny. This thesis surveyed how Tyler Durden attempted to supersede all forms of divine sanctifications with his own transcendent decree. Leading a demystified existence, he was determined to design the path of his destiny. By displacing both God and Father, Palahniuk negated all kinds of authoritative structures that seemingly favored the deterioration of the human psyche. He proposed instead a self-effacing Manifest

Destiny that would base its prospects on restoring the subjective experience and alleviating the postmodern spiritual abyss.

In both novels, desacralizing the Manifest Destiny from its religious narrative played a key role in delegitimizing the state of violence involved in the perpetuation of this cultural myth. Within the construct of the Manifest Destiny, the hero's use of violence was conventionally redeemed by saving the "weak female." Eventually, this created a common formula of the "defenseless woman" whose rescue justified all cases of brutality. Despite the gender conflicts presented in both narratives, Puzo and Palahniuk discarded this patriarchal representation and attributed their female characters the heroic role instead. Ultimately, this emphasized the needlessness to legitimize the antihero's violence, embracing, by that, an unredeemable Manifest Destiny.

This research attempted to examine the durability of Richard Slotkin's order of the frontier experience and its process of regeneration through violence in a postmodern context. *The Godfather* concretized the aligning of the frontier as engraved in the American mythogenesis. Michael Corleone abided by the quest of the frontier hunter who regenerated and perpetuated his existence through violence. Reenacting the postmodern forms of Universe, Protagonist and Narrative, he was able to epitomize the essence of the frontier commission. Ultimately, this measure exposed the narrative of a regenerative frontier experience based on divine and redeeming purposes. It revealed that the state of violence was, indeed, regenerative, an ingrained seed that preserved and eternalized the discursive power of the Manifest Destiny.

Surpassing the simplistic aim of exposing a flagrant discourse of a violent Manifest Destiny, *Fight Club*, for its part, challenged the entire structure of this myth. By initiating a backward process in Slotkin's order of the frontier experience, Tyler Durden regressed to the status quo of chaos and savagery to regenerate a purified State of Nature. His reenactment of the hunter myth in a postmodern context shed a revealing light on the consequences of the Manifest Destiny and proposed a reevaluation of its founding pillars. Though this

credulous dream fell short of promise, Palahniuk succeeded in asserting that a culture built on violence could only regenerate through violence.

Committing to Cawelti's insights of "Formula," this thesis endeavored to discern the evolution of antiheroic resistances from *The Godfather* to *Fight Club* and how this might be reflective of a more culturally engaged popular fiction. In delegitimizing the capitalist motives of the Manifest Destiny, *The Godfather* disclosed the conventional process of "legitimation" employed to disguise the delinquencies of capitalism in materialistic America. *Fight Club*, for its part, employed a "delegitimation" approach that aimed to destroy and replace the narrative of a virtuous Manifest Destiny. The escalation from disclosure to destruction reflected a growing consciousness that evolved from the late sixties to the end of the twentieth century. A new discourse of cultural awareness developed within an engrossed American audience who learnt to recognize the repercussions of a capitalist Manifest Destiny.

The progressive process of delegitimizing the religious narrative of the Manifest Destiny is also reflective of a more skeptical American audience. *The Godfather* exposed the conventional ambivalence of a desacralized Manifest Destiny immersed in a sinful and criminal enterprise. *Fight Club*, for its part, negated all schemes of divine order to redefine this myth as an individual experience. The evolution from defiance to disavowal mirrored the audience's growing attitude of skepticism and lack of faith in the divine peculiarity of the American nation.

Delegitimizing the regenerative frontier experience marked the diverging difference between *The Godfather* and *Fight Club*. The formula of regeneration through violence between convention and invention was portrayed by a progression and retrogression process. *The Godfather* reproduced the conventional design of the frontier experience to invigorate a postmodern Manifest Destiny based on criminal violence. *Fight Club*, for its part, introduced an invention to the frontier experience that disputed the core of the Manifest Destiny. By regressing to chaos and savagery, violence, in *Fight Club*, denoted

an elaborate scale of a cultural revolution, laying its destructive elements without any attempt of “legitimation.”

Through *The Godfather* and *Fight Club*, it was demonstrated how The Manifest Destiny regenerates through violence to serve the capitalist interests of a nation that apotheosizes its own divine force. The deviating point among these narratives, however, remains the exposition of the state of violence. While *The Godfather* bluntly uncovers violence in the virtuous and divine character of the Manifest Destiny, it still abides by the conventional American standards of “legitimation.” *Fight Club*, for its part, fails to concoct this legitimacy which disturbingly discloses the metanarrative of the Manifest Destiny. While the American audiences are constantly exposed to the realities of their violent myths, the process of regeneration through violence still requires a legitimizing narrative to serve as a moral justification that excuses all trespasses from the Christ-nation.

Michael Corleone and Tyler Durden’s journeys were determined by the same design of a timeless cultural myth, and their antiheroic paths were shaped by its growing forces and discursive vehicles. When juxtaposing their pathways, Michael’s fight was a personal mission of fulfillment led against external struggles. Tyler, however, manifested an internal battle that aimed to alter a communal condition. Though both of them are genuinely deranged criminals, their characterization touched upon a colossal issue of American civilization, and their adventures reflected the awareness, acceptance and hesitation of an evolving American audience. These antiheroes denuded the Manifest Destiny from its cloak of perfectibility; Michael Corleone was immersed in an American culture that excels in legitimating criminal business under the pretences of virtue, divine honors and regenerative frontier mission; Tyler Durden, for his part, endeavored to reestablish a new culture that would perhaps one day actualize these proclaimed ideals.

Reviving the Manifest Destiny through postmodern narratives and theories proved its eternal perpetuity in the American society. This thesis modestly attempted to determine its timelessness as a discourse that still shapes the American mind. More importantly, it aimed to prove the worthiness

and capability of popular culture in reassessing crucial cultural foundations. By progressively delegitimizing one of America's most influential myths, popular culture is gradually construing an evolving pattern of defiance and a formula of cultural resistance. Eventually, this reflects on its monumental position as a powerful tool for social and cultural criticism.

This thesis might inspire future students to divert their academic research from the overly exhausted canons to the works of popular culture which are just as fruitful and worthy of scrutiny and appreciation. This progressive formula in popular culture provides new research outlets for forthcoming considerations of the Manifest Destiny, American Exceptionalism, American heroism or other American myths. The process of delegitimizing American cultural foundations is witnessed in several artistic works of popular culture. This research has already hinted at Sam Ismail's television series *Mr. Robot* which supplies new leads in investigating the evolution of the antihero's destiny. Other inquiries might consider a closer scrutiny on Eliot Alderson under film theories to determine the progression of new formulas in popular culture. These promising suggestions are left for my fellow researchers.

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Résumé :

La culture populaire s'est progressivement enrichi de précieuses contributions dont la valeur intellectuelle est inestimable, introduisant ce phénomène en plein essor dans le monde universitaire des études littéraires et culturelles. Cette recherche se consacre au rôle de la fiction populaire dans l'évaluation, la critique et l'inspection d'aspects primordiaux tels que la destinée manifeste «The American Manifest Destiny ». La présente thèse mène une étude comparative entre « Le Parrain », de Mario Puzo (1969) et « Fight Club », de Chuck Palahniuk (1996). Cette enquête s'est fixé pour but d'évaluer les progrès des anti-héros dépeints, représentés par Michael Corleone et Tyler Durden, dans leurs tentatives de délégitimer la destinée manifeste. Plus précisément, elle se réfère au philosophe français Jean François Lyotard et sa vision portée sur les récits culturels –à l'image de la destinée manifeste – comme un « métarécit » qui met en relief l'incrédulité du postmodernisme. L'analyse s'appuie également sur John G. Cawelti et son concept de « Formule » qui confère une juste valeur aux arts de la culture populaire. Les résultats de la recherche révèlent une attitude progressivement radicale – tant au niveau des outils employés que des objectifs visés – pour délégitimer le mythe de la destinée manifeste. Ils suggèrent également que cette position réformiste reflète une nouvelle prise de conscience d'un public américain en évolution. Enfin, les résultats concluants soulignent la capacité de la culture populaire à construire une formule dynamique de résistance culturelle.

Mots clés :

Antihéros américain, délégitimation, légitimation, destin manifeste, culture populaire, fiction populaire, violence régénérative.

ملخص :

شهدت الثقافة الشعبية إثراءات تدريجية عديدة، بمساهمات ذات قيمة فكرية جد ثمينة، ما أفضى إلى ولوج هذه الظاهرة المزدهرة في خضم الفضاء الأكاديمي للدراسات الأدبية والثقافية. يُعنى هذا البحث بدور الرواية الشعبية في تقييم وانتقاد وتفحص الجوانب الرئيسية مثل المصير الأمريكي، حيث تقدم هذه الأطروحة دراسة مقارنة بين (1969) *The Godfather* لـ Mario Puzo و (1996) *Fight Club* لـ Chuck Palahniuk؛ الهدف منها هو تقييم تطور مناهضي-الأبطال المُصورين، مُمثلين بمايكل كورليوني وتايلر دوردن، في محاولاتهم لرفع الشرعية عن المصير الواضح. بهذا الصدد، تعتمد هذه الدراسة، تحديداً، على الفيلسوف الفرنسي جان فرانسوا ليوتار ورئيته للروايات الثقافية، لا سيما تلك الخاصة بالمصير الواضح -باعتبارها "ما وراء السرد" يوضح الشك في ما بعد الحداثة. يعتمد التحليل أيضاً على John G. Cawelti ومفهومه لـ "الصيغة" (The Formula) الذي يقدم قيمة مطابقة لفنون الثقافة الشعبية. يأتي البحث بنتائج عن موقف راديكالي تدريجي، من حيث الأدوات المستخدمة والأهداف المسطرة - في رفع الشرعية عن أسطورة المصير الواضح. كما تقترح النتائج أن هذا الموقف الإصلاحي يعكس وعياً جديداً للجمهور الأمريكي المتطور، كما تؤكد على قدرة الثقافة الشعبية في تفسير صيغة ديناميكية للمقاومة الثقافية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

مناهض البطل الأمريكي، رفع الشرعية، الشرعية، المصير الواضح، الثقافة الشعبية، الخيال الشعبي، العنف المتجدد.