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# Hierarchies in Hell and Leaderless Fight Clubs: Altruism, Narrative, and the Adaptive Appeal of Bad Boys

Dennis J. Junk

*Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne*

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# HIERARCHIES IN HELL AND LEADERLESS FIGHT CLUBS: ALTRUISM, NARRATIVE, AND THE ADAPTIVE APPEAL OF BAD BOYS

Dennis J. Junk

Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree  
Master of Arts  
in the Department of English and Linguistics  
Indiana University  
May 2012

## MASTER'S ACCEPTANCE PAGE

Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, Indiana University, in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Dennis Junk

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'll never forget the first time I encountered Milton's Satan in Ms. Jackson's A.P. English class at Bishop Dwenger High School, but I wouldn't learn that I wasn't alone in being won over by the character until I was in M.L. Stapleton's class on 17<sup>th</sup> Century English Poetry at IPFW. Likewise, I was well acquainted with Palahniuk's Tyler Durden long before entering the English graduate program, but I never started wondering about whether or not he could be considered an altruist until a conversation with Michael Kaufmann after a meeting of his Contemporary American Fiction class. I wrote my first paper about William Flesch's theory of narrative interest under the auspices of Hardin Aasand, who looked on with patient amusement as I responded to one after another of the literary theories in his Critical Theory class first by being appalled and then by searching desperately for more scientific approaches. I continued applying the theory in papers written for Lidan Lin's courses, as well as those taught by Dr. Kaufmann. Though the evolutionary approaches I was using were new to them all, each of these professors encouraged me to pursue my interests and my passions with the most open of minds and the most altruistic of hopes for my future success.

## PREFACE

William Flesch, in his book *Comeuppance: Costly Signaling, Altruistic Punishment, and Other Biological Components of Fiction*, theorizes that humans' passion for fictional narratives emerges from a predilection for monitoring one another for signals of their capacity for cooperative relationships. Humans naturally favor conspecifics who prove themselves capable of setting aside their own rational self-interests to act on behalf of others or on behalf of the larger group to which they belong. At the same time, they demonstrate their own altruistic tendencies by favoring other altruists and punishing those who would take advantage of them. In his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, John Milton inadvertently created in Satan a captivating character who has won the favor of readers for generations. Does the character somehow signal to readers that he is altruistic? A similar, modern example of a supposedly bad character who nevertheless manages to win the admiration of readers is Tyler Durden from Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club*. Is there some type of underlying message about cooperation in the seemingly senseless violence in this story?

Flesch leaves unexplored a dimension of evolutionary psychology which could provide some insight into the appeal of both Milton's and Palahniuk's stories.

Anthropologist Christopher Boehm explores the human propensity toward forming hierarchies in his book *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior*. It turns out that, contrary to conventional wisdom, humans in foraging bands similar to those they have lived in for the vast majority of their time on earth are strictly egalitarian. Indeed, most contemporary hunter-gatherers would, with little prompting, express support for Satan's famous line about it being better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.

They would also quite likely recognize many of the group dynamics Tyler Durden manipulates to gain ascendancy among the members of the fight clubs—as well as the ultimate necessity of having someone end his reign.

The theoretical foundation established by Flesch can likely support considerations of male competition for status—along with the social mechanisms that mitigate it—since one of the preconditions thought necessary for the evolution of cooperation among humans is a relative absence of hierarchical behavior. One common form of selfishness humans are vigilant of in their neighbors is a strong motivation to dominate others. When a person, or a fictional representation of one, acquires influence incommensurate with others in the group, those other group members can be counted on to pay close attention to the way that person yields his (or less often her) power. If it turns out to be for the benefit of the group, the higher-status individual will continue to have the support of the group's members. If it is to further purely selfish interests, the lower-ranking group members will usually act collectively to bring an end to his dominance. This dynamic has been playing out in stories told by hunter-gatherers and writers in more complex societies alike since time immemorial.

This work explores the central characters of *Paradise Lost* and *Fight Club* in an attempt to illuminate readers' feelings toward them. In particular, it will focus on Milton's Satan and Palahniuk's Tyler Durden, and will examine the way in which they are portrayed in search of recognizable signals of either selfishness or altruism. Such an exploration might also yield insights into how Boehm's theories of human hierarchical or egalitarian proclivities can be integrated into the approach to literature set out by Flesch.

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## Introduction:

### Altruism and Narrative Interest

In a *New York Times* article published in the spring of 2010, psychologist Paul Bloom tells the story of a one-year-old boy's remarkable response to a puppet show. The drama the puppets enacted began with a central character's demonstration of a desire to play with a ball. After revealing that intention, the character rolls the ball to a second character who likewise wants to play and so rolls the ball back to the first. When the first character rolls the ball to a third, however, this puppet snatches it up and quickly absconds. The second, nice puppet and the third, mean one are then placed before the boy, who's been keenly attentive to their doings, and they both have placed before them a few treats. The boy is now instructed by one of the adults in the room to take a treat away from one of the puppets. Most children respond to the instructions by taking the treat away from the mean puppet, and this particular boy is no different. He's not content with such a meager punishment, though, and after removing the treat he proceeds to reach out and smack the mean puppet on the head.

Brief stage shows like the one featuring the nice and naughty puppets are part of an ongoing research program lead by Karen Wynn, Bloom's wife and colleague, and graduate student Kiley Hamlin at Yale University's Infant Cognition Center. An earlier permutation of the study was featured on PBS's *Nova* series *The Human Spark*, which shows host Alan Alda looking on as an infant named Jessica attends to a puppet show with the same script as the one that riled the boy Bloom describes. Jessica is so tiny that her ability to track and interpret the puppets' behavior on any level is impressive, but when she demonstrates a rudimentary capacity for moral judgment by reaching with

unchecked joy for the nice puppet while barely glancing at the mean one, Alda—and *Nova* viewers along with him—can’t help but demonstrate his own delight. Jessica shows unmistakable signs of positive emotion in response to the nice puppet’s behaviors, and Alda in turn feels positive emotions toward Jessica. Bloom attests that “if you watch the older babies during the experiments, they don’t act like impassive judges—they tend to smile and clap during good events and frown, shake their heads and look sad during the naughty events” (6). Any adult witnessing the children’s reactions can be counted on to mirror these expressions and to feel delight at the babies’ incredible precocity.

The setup for these experiments with children is very similar to experiments with adult participants that assess responses to anonymously witnessed exchanges. In their research report, “Third-Party Punishment and Social Norms,” Ernst Fehr and Urs Fischbacher describe a scenario inspired by economic game theory called the Dictator Game. It begins with an experimenter giving a first participant, or player, a sum of money. The experimenter then explains to this first player that he or she is to propose a cut of the money to a second player. In the Dictator Game—as opposed to other similar game theory scenarios—the second player has no choice but to accept the cut from the first player, the dictator. The catch is that the exchange is being witnessed by a third party, the analogue of little Jessica or the head-slapping avenger in the Yale experiments. This third player is then given the opportunity to reward or punish the dictator. As Fehr and Fischbacher explain, “Punishment is, however, costly for the third party so a selfish third party will never punish” (3).

It turns out, though, that adults, just like the infants in the Yale studies, are not selfish—at least not entirely. Instead, they readily engage in indirect, or strong,

reciprocity. Evolutionary literary theorist William Flesch explains that “the strong reciprocator punishes and rewards others for their behavior toward any member of the social group, and not just or primarily for their interactions with the reciprocator” (21-2). According to Flesch, strong reciprocity is the key to solving what he calls “the puzzle of narrative interest,” the mystery of why humans so readily and eagerly feel “anxiety on behalf of and about the motives, actions, and experiences of fictional characters” (7). The human tendency toward strong reciprocity reaches beyond any third party witnessing an exchange between two others; as Alda, viewers of *Nova*, and even readers of Bloom’s article in the *Times* watch or read about Wynn and Hamlin’s experiments, they have no choice but to become participants in the experiments themselves, because their own tendency to reward good behavior with positive emotion and to punish bad behavior with negative emotion is automatically engaged. Audiences’ concern, however, is much less with the puppets’ behavior than with the infants’ responses to it.

The studies of social and moral development conducted at the Infant Cognition Center pull at witnesses’ heartstrings because they demonstrate babies’ capacity to behave in a way that is expected of adults. If Jessica had failed to discern between the nice and the mean puppets, viewers probably would have readily forgiven her. When older people fail to make moral distinctions, however, those in a position to witness and appreciate that failure can be counted on to withdraw their favor—and may even engage in some type of sanctioning, beginning with unflattering gossip and becoming more severe if the immorality or moral complacency persists. Strong reciprocity opens the way for endlessly branching  $n^{\text{th}}$ -order reciprocation, so not only will individuals be considered

culpable for offenses they commit but also for offenses they passively witness. Flesch explains,

Among the kinds of behavior that we monitor through tracking or through report, and that we have a tendency to punish or reward, is the way others monitor behavior through tracking or through report, and the way they manifest a tendency to punish and reward. (50)

Failing to signal disapproval makes witnesses complicit. On the other hand, signaling favor toward individuals who behave altruistically simultaneously signals to others the altruism of the signaler. What's important to note about this sort of indirect signaling is that it does not necessarily require the original offense or benevolent act to have actually occurred. People take a proclivity to favor the altruistic as evidence of altruism—even if the altruistic character is fictional.

That infants less than a year old respond to unfair or selfish behavior with negative emotions—and a readiness to punish—suggests that strong reciprocity has deep evolutionary roots in the human lineage. Humans' profound emotional engagement with fictional characters and fictional exchanges probably derives from a long history of adapting to challenges whose Darwinian ramifications were far more serious than any attempt to while away some idle afternoons. Game theorists and evolutionary anthropologists have a good idea what those challenges might have been: for cooperativeness or altruism to be established and maintained as a norm within a group of conspecifics, some mechanism must be in place to prevent the exploitation of cooperative or altruistic individuals by selfish and devious ones. Flesch explains,

Darwin himself had proposed a way for altruism to evolve through the mechanism of group selection. Groups with altruists do better *as a group* than groups without. But it was shown in the 1960s that, in fact, such groups would be too easily infiltrated or invaded by nonaltruists—that is, that group boundaries are too

porous—to make group selection strong enough to overcome competition at the level of the individual or the gene. (5)

If, however, individuals given to trying to take advantage of cooperative norms were reliably met with slaps on the head—or with ostracism in the wake of spreading gossip—any benefits they (or their genes) might otherwise count on to redound from their selfish behavior would be much diminished. Flesch’s theory is “that we have explicitly evolved the ability and desire to track others and *to learn their stories* precisely in order to punish the guilty (and somewhat secondarily to reward the virtuous)” (21). Before strong reciprocity was driving humans to bookstores, amphitheaters, and cinemas, then, it was serving the life-and-death cause of ensuring group cohesion and sealing group boundaries against neighboring exploiters.

Game theory experiments that have been conducted since the early 1980s have consistently shown that people are willing, even eager to punish others whose behavior strikes them as unfair or exploitative, even when administering that punishment involves incurring some cost for the punisher. Like the Dictator Game, the Ultimatum Game involves two people, one of whom is given a sum of money and told to offer the other participant a cut. The catch in this scenario is that the second player must accept the cut or neither player gets to keep any money. “It is irrational for the responder not to accept any proposed split from the proposer,” Flesch writes. “The responder will always come out better by accepting than vetoing” (31). What the researchers discovered, though, was that a line exists beneath which responders will almost always refuse the cut. “This means they are paying to punish,” Flesch explains. “They are giving up a sure gain in order to punish the selfishness of the proposer” (31). Game theorists call this behavior altruistic punishment because “the punisher’s willingness to pay this cost may be an

important part in enforcing norms of fairness” (31). In other words, the punisher is incurring a cost to him or herself in order to ensure that selfish actors don’t have a chance to get a foothold in the larger, cooperative group.

The economic logic notwithstanding, it seems natural to most people that second players in Ultimatum Game experiments should signal their disapproval—or stand up for themselves, as it were—by refusing to accept insultingly meager proposals. The cost of the punishment, moreover, can be seen as a symbol of various other types of considerations that might prevent a participant or a witness from stepping up or stepping in to protest. Discussing the Three-Player Dictator Game experiments conducted by Fehr and Fischbacher, Flesch points out that strong reciprocity is even more starkly contrary to any selfish accounting:

Note that the third player gets nothing out of paying to reward or punish except the power or agency to do just that. It is highly irrational for this player to pay to reward or punish, but again considerations of fairness trump rational self-interest. People do pay, and pay a substantial amount, when they think that someone has been treated notably unfairly, or when they think someone has evinced marked generosity, to affect what they have observed. (33)

Neuroscientists have even zeroed in on the brain regions that correspond to our suppression of immediate self-interest in the service of altruistic punishment, as well as those responsible for the pleasure we take in anticipating—though not in actually witnessing—free riders meeting with their just deserts (Knoch et al. 829; Quevain et al. 1254). Outside of laboratories, though, the cost punishers incur can range from the risks associated with a physical confrontation to time and energy spent convincing skeptical peers a crime has indeed been committed.

Flesch lays out his theory of narrative interest in a book aptly titled *Comeuppance: Costly Signaling, Altruistic Punishment, and Other Biological*

*Components of Fiction.* A cursory survey of mainstream fiction, in both blockbuster movies and best-selling novels, reveals the good guys versus bad guys dynamic as preeminent in nearly every plot, and much of the pleasure people get from the most popular narratives can quite plausibly be said to derive from the goodie prevailing—after a long, harrowing series of close calls and setbacks—while the baddie simultaneously gets his or her comeuppance. Audiences love to see characters get their just deserts. When the plot fails to deliver on this score, they walk away severely disturbed. That disturbance can, however, serve the author's purposes, particularly when the goal is to bring some danger or injustice to readers' or viewers' attention, as in the case of novels like Orwell's *1984*.

Plots, of course, seldom feature simple exchanges with meager stakes on the scale of game theory experiments, and heroes can by no means count on making it to the final scene both vindicated and rewarded—even in stories designed to give audiences exactly what they want. The ultimate act of altruistic punishment, and hence the most emotionally poignant behavior a character can engage in, is martyrdom. It's no coincidence that the hero dies in the act of vanquishing the villain in so many of the most memorable books and movies.

If narrative interest really does emerge from a propensity to monitor each other's behaviors for signs of a capacity for cooperation and to volunteer affect on behalf of altruistic individuals and against selfish ones they want to see get their comeuppance, the strong appeal of certain seemingly bad characters emerges as a mystery calling for explanation. From England's tradition of Byronic heroes like Rochester to America's fascination with bad boys like Tom Sawyer, these characters win over audiences and

stand out as perennial favorites, even though at first blush they seem anything but eager to establish their nice guy bone fides. On the other hand, Rochester was eventually redeemed in *Jane Eyre*, and Tom Sawyer, though naughty to be sure, shows no sign whatsoever of being malicious. Tellingly, though, these characters, and a long list of others like them, also demonstrate a remarkable degree of cleverness: Rochester passing for a gypsy woman, for instance, or Tom Sawyer making fence painting out to be a privilege. One hypothesis that could account for the appeal of bad boys is that their badness demonstrates undeniably their ability to escape the negative consequences most people expect to result from their own bad behavior.

This type of demonstration likely functions in a way similar to another mechanism that many evolutionary biologists theorize must have been operating for cooperation to have become established in human societies, a process referred to as the handicap principle, or costly signaling. A lone altruist in any group is unlikely to fare well in terms of survival and reproduction. So the question arises as to how the minimum threshold of cooperators in a population was first surmounted. Flesch's fellow evolutionary critic, Brian Boyd, in his book *On the Origin of Stories*, traces the process along a path from mutualism, or coincidental mutual benefits, to inclusive fitness, whereby organisms help others who are likely to share their genes—primarily family members—to reciprocal altruism, a quid pro quo arrangement in which one organism will aid another in anticipation of some future repayment (54-57). However, a few individuals in our human ancestry must have benefited from altruism that went beyond familial favoritism and tit-for-tat bartering.



In their classic book *The Handicap Principle*, Amotz and Avishag Zahavi suggest that altruism serves a function in cooperative species similar to the one served by a peacock's feathers. The principle could also help account for the appeal of human individuals who routinely risk suffering consequences which deter most others. The idea is that conspecifics have much to gain from accurate assessments of each other's fitness when choosing mates or allies. Many species have thus evolved methods for honestly signaling their fitness, and as the Zahavis explain, "in order to be effective, signals have to be reliable; in order to be reliable, signals have to be costly" (xiv). Peacocks, the iconic examples of the principle in action, signal their fitness with cumbersome plumage because their ability to survive in spite of the handicap serves as a guarantee of their strength and resourcefulness. Flesch and Boyd, inspired by evolutionary anthropologists, find in this theory of costly signaling the solution the mystery of how altruism first became established; human altruism is, if anything, even more elaborate than the peacock's display.

Humans display their fitness in many ways. Not everyone can be expected to have the wherewithal to punish free-riders, especially when doing so involves physical conflict. The paradoxical result is that humans compete for the status of best cooperator because altruism is a costly signal of fitness. Flesch explains how this competition could have emerged in human populations:

If there is a lot of between-group competition, then those groups whose modes of costly signaling take the form of strong reciprocity, especially altruistic punishment, will outcompete those whose modes yield less secondary gain, especially less secondary gain for the group as a whole. (57)

Taken together, the evidence Flesch presents suggests the audiences of narratives volunteer affect on behalf of fictional characters who show themselves to be altruists and

against those who show themselves to be selfish actors or exploiters, experiencing both frustration and delight in the unfolding of the plot as they hope to see the altruists prevail and the free-riders get their comeuppance. Flesch points out that this theory illuminates the role of the storyteller as well: “The story tells a story of punishment; the story punishes as story; the storyteller represents him- or herself as an altruistic punisher by telling it” (83). This capacity for emotional engagement with fiction likely evolved because it also serves as a signal to anyone monitoring individuals as they read or view the story, or as they discuss it later, that they are disposed either toward altruistic punishment or toward third-order free-riding themselves—and altruism is a costly signal of fitness.

The hypothesis emerging from this theory of social monitoring and volunteered affect to explain the appeal of bad boy characters is that their bad behavior will tend to redound to the detriment of still worse characters. Bloom describes the results of another series of experiments (Hamlin et al. 1993) with eight-month-old participants:

When the target of the action was itself a good guy, babies preferred the puppet who was nice to it. This alone wasn’t very surprising, given that the other studies found an overall preference among babies for those who act nicely. What was more interesting was what happened when they watched the bad guy being rewarded or punished. Here they chose the punisher. Despite their overall preference for good actors over bad, then, babies are drawn to bad actors when those actors are punishing bad behavior. (5)

These characters’ bad behavior will also likely serve an obvious function as costly signaling; they’re bad because they’re good at getting away with it. Evidence that the bad boy characters are somehow truly malicious—for instance, clear signals of a wish to harm innocent characters—or that they’re irredeemably antisocial would severely undermine the theory.

The spectrum of adult male behavior from purely selfish to purely altruistic extends into domains that would be difficult to capture in experiments with infant boys and girls. Anthropologist Christopher Boehm has written an indispensable ethnological examination of every group of nomadic hunter-gathers that have been studied. In his book, *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior*, he adds another important piece to the puzzle of human altruism and strong reciprocity. Based on the remarkable finding that “A distinctly egalitarian political style is highly predictable wherever people live in small, locally autonomous social and economic groups” (36), at least among the men, whom he observes tend to be the “main political actors” (5), Boehm theorizes that political and economic parity among men and households was what made the evolution of altruistic punishment and general selflessness possible. He posits that

the advent of egalitarianism shifted the balance of forces within natural selection so that within-group selection was substantially debilitated and between-group selection was amplified. At the same time, egalitarian moral communities found themselves uniquely positioned to suppress free-riding...at the level of the phenotype. With respect to the natural selection of behavior genes, this mechanical formula clearly favors the retention of altruistic traits. (199)

This theory narrows the scope for what behaviors audiences of fiction can be expected to be particularly vigilant of. In a pleasing synthesis of evolutionary modeling, psychological experiments, real-world anthropological observations, and literary theory, Boehm places the role of narrative at the heart of the egalitarian ethos:

As practical political philosophers, foragers perceive quite correctly that self-aggrandizement and individual authority are threats to personal autonomy. When upstarts try to make inroads against an egalitarian social order, they will be quickly recognized and, in many cases, quickly curbed on a preemptive basis. One reason for this sensitivity is that the oral tradition of a band (which includes knowledge from adjacent bands) will preserve stories about serious domination episodes. (87)

As the first step toward a preliminary survey, the following sections examine two infamous instances in which literary characters whose creators intended audiences to recognize as bad nonetheless managed to steal the show from the supposed good guys. The obvious candidate to be considered first in the history of literary bad boys is Satan from Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*. In an essay written in the early in the 1790s, a hundred and twenty years after the publication of Milton's masterpiece, William Blake suggests, "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it." Milton's Satan was in fact the inspiration for the original Byronic heroes, as Lord Byron himself was quite impressed by the character.

There is today no shortage of renowned bad boy characters in popular culture—Tony Soprano, Jack Sparrow, Don Draper, Gregory House, to name just a few—but none has sparked quite as much controversy among literary and cultural critics as Tyler Durden from Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel *Fight Club* and the 1999 film version directed by David Fincher. Responding to critic Henry Giroux's charge that the story and its characters are "morally bankrupt," Jesse Kavadlo, even as he attempts to defend Palahniuk, has to admit that, "More unsettling than Giroux's academic denunciation is the popular readership that identifies too strongly with Tyler Durden" (11).

Flesch's theory of narrative interest offers two hypotheses to consider in examining the characters of Satan and Tyler Durden: the first is that their bad behavior will take the form of costly signaling or altruistic punishment; the second is that there will be one or more other characters whose behavior is worse—more clearly selfish or antisocial—than the behavior of the bad boy himself, and it will be this character or

characters at whom the bad boy's bad behavior is directed. Boehm's theories on the natural human tendency to protect individual autonomy from dominating leaders provides a third, refining hypothesis: the selfish behavior the bad boys' bad behavior is intended to punish will often take the form of an abuse of power.

## Part 1

### The Satanic Spring

In Edward P. Jones' 2003 Pulitzer-winning novel *The Known World*, the aging black teacher Fern Elston tells a pamphleteer researching the life of a freed slave named Henry Townsend, who went on to become a slave-owner himself, about some of the books that had intrigued her former student. "Do you know Milton, Mr. Frazier?" she asks. "Do you know *Paradise Lost*, Mr. Frazier?" The pamphleteer says he does know Milton and *Paradise Lost*. She responds,

So did Henry. "Ain't that a thing to say" is what he said of the Devil who proclaimed that he would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven. He thought only a man who knew himself well could say such a thing, could turn his back on God with just finality. I tried to make him see what a horrible choice that was, but Henry had made up his mind about that and I could not turn him back. He loved Milton. (134-5)

In having his character come away from *Paradise Lost* with a keen admiration for Satan, to his teacher's consternation, Jones was representing a long tradition of controversy over Milton's anti-hero. This is the character who rebels against God, whose temptation of Adam and Eve loosed on humanity the torments of Sin and Death, and who Christ had to suffer and die to vanquish. Even readers willing to admit Satan cuts an impressive figure and makes a few good points in his arguments surely feel a tinge of panic every time they catch themselves nodding along with his declamations or feel their gooseflesh rising at his rousing calls to arm.

Customarily, Milton is pardoned for inadvertently lending sympathetic dimensions to the character of the Arch Fiend with reference to his presumed confusion about his true subject matter. The year 1649 saw the execution of King Charles I, a punishment Milton defended in his prose writing. Under Charles, the Church of England had become too rigidly hierarchical and dogmatic. So, when Milton has Satan righteously challenge the absolute rule of God, many readers assume the sentiments are simply misdirected. An accounting of what exactly Milton has his anti-hero do and say that makes him both sympathetic and admirable, however, will likely aid in any attempt at understanding how strong reciprocity functions to rouse the emotions of readers and how that process sometimes results in their favoring the nominal bad guy.

Milton believed Christianity more than worthy of a poetic canon in the tradition of the classical poets, and *Paradise Lost* represents his effort at establishing one. What his Christian epic has offered for many readers over the centuries, however, is an invitation to weigh the actions and motivations of immortals in mortal terms. In the story, God becomes a human king, albeit one with superhuman powers, while Satan becomes an upstart subject. As Milton sets out to “justify the ways of God to men,” he is taking it upon himself simultaneously, and inadvertently, to justify the absolute dominion of a human dictator. One of the consequences of this shift in perspective is the transformation of a philosophical tradition devoted to parsing the logic of biblical teachings into something akin to a political campaign between two rival leaders, each laying out his respective platform alongside a case against his rival. What was hitherto recondite and academic becomes in Milton’s work immediate and visceral.

Christopher Boehm's analysis of hunter-gather political behavior provides an ideal foundation for any discussion of strong reciprocity and human psychological reactions to selfishness and altruism in the context of hierarchical relations even when the society in question is much larger and more complex than those of nomadic foragers. He explains,

We need not limit our analysis to egalitarians who live in bands or tribes, for we have seen that a universal political dilemma is abuse of power. Egalitarians may define it on a hair-trigger basis, whereas in a hierarchical chiefdom people expect their leader to throw his weight around to a moderate degree. Even in a highly despotic primitive kingdom, where the leader rules by coercive force, the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate use of power continues to be defined by public opinion. There, however, psychological ambivalences about abuse of power may remain permanently unresolved: the rank and file may quietly complain about a tyrant's behavior even as fear of his loyal soldiers keeps them from active rebellion. (241)

*Paradise Lost* is a story about punishment, first Satan's and then Man's. If, however, Satan's revolt against God is justified by God's tyrannical behavior, then Satan could thus be seen as an altruistic punisher, as he risks taking on God's "loyal soldiers." What Flesch describes as "a fundamental aspect of plot" is at the center of the conflict between these two characters: "the conflict between true and false vindication, that is, the conflict between laudable vindication and the blameworthy vindictiveness it doubles and confounds" (163). Readers of Milton's poems are faced with the task of deciding whether God or Satan is the one who is truly vindicated, the one whose violence truly represents altruistic punishment.

Keats famously penned the wonderfully self-proving postulate, "Axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses," which leaves open the question of how an axiom might be so proved. Milton's God responds to Satan's

approach to Earth, and his foreknowledge of Satan's success in tempting the original pair, with a preemptive defense of his preordained punishment of Man:

...Whose fault?  
Whose but his own? Ingrate! He had of Me  
All he could have. I made him just and right,  
Sufficient to have stood though free to fall.  
Such I created all th' ethereal pow'rs  
And spirits, both them who stood and who failed:  
Freely they stood who stood and fell who fell.  
Not free, what proof could they have giv'n sincere  
Of true allegiance, constant faith or love  
Where only what they needs must do appeared,  
Not what they would? What praise could they receive?  
What pleasure I from such obedience paid  
When will and reason... had served necessity,  
Not me? (3.96-111)

God is defending himself against the charge that his foreknowledge of the fall implies that Man's decision to disobey was borne of something other than his free will. What choice could there have been if the outcome of Satan's temptation was predetermined? If it wasn't predetermined, how could God know what the outcome would be in advance? God's answer—of course I granted humans free will because otherwise their obedience would mean nothing—only introduces further doubt. Now, readers must wonder why God so fervently relishes Man's obedience.

Is God hungry for political power? If readers conclude that he is—and that conclusion seems eminently warranted—then they find themselves on the side of Satan. "Bands," Boehm writes, "are moral communities that agree on their values and, as a latent but potent political coalition, are always poised to manipulate or suppress individual deviates." Each culture implicitly codifies the rules by which political power is to be expressed or wielded, and everyone remains vigilant lest his individual freedom



come under threat from a leader maneuvering to achieve a position of clear dominance.

“On their list of serious moral transgressions,” Boehm explains,

hunter-gathers regularly proscribe the enactment of behavior that is politically overbearing. They are aiming at upstarts who threaten the autonomy of other group members, and upstartism takes various forms. An upstart may act the bully simply because he is disposed to dominate others, or he may become selfishly greedy when it is time to share meat, or he may want to make off with another man’s wife by threat or by force. He (or sometimes she) may also be a respected leader who suddenly begins to issue direct orders... An upstart may simply take on airs of superiority, or may aggressively put others down and thereby violate the group’s idea of how its main political actors should be treating one another. (43)

It’s not God’s foreknowledge of Man’s fall that undermines human freedom; it’s God’s insistence on our obedience, under threat of God’s terrible punishment.

Milton faces a still greater challenge in his attempt to justify God’s ways “upon our pulses” when it comes to the fallout of Man’s original act of disobedience. The Son argues on behalf of Man, pointing out that the original sin was brought about through temptation. If God responds by turning against Man, then Satan wins. The Son thus argues that God must do something to thwart Satan: “Or shall the Adversary thus obtain/ His end and frustrate Thine?” (3.156-7) Before laying out his plan for Man’s redemption, God explains why punishment is necessary:

...Man disobeying  
Disloyal breaks his fealty and sins  
Against the high supremacy of Heav’n,  
Affecting godhead, and so, losing all,  
To expiate his treason hath naught left  
But to destruction sacred and devote  
He with his whole posterity must die. (3. 203-9)

The potential contradiction between foreknowledge and free choice may be abstruse enough for Milton’s character to convincingly discount: “If I foreknew/ Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault/ Which had no less proved certain unforeknown” (3.116-

9). There is another contradiction, however, that Milton neglects to take on. If Man is “Sufficient to have stood though free to fall,” then God must justify his decision to punish the “whole posterity” as opposed to the individuals who choose to disobey. The Son agrees to redeem all of humanity for the offense committed by the original pair. His knowledge that every last human will disobey may not be logically incompatible with their freedom to choose; if every last human does disobey, however, the case for that freedom is severely undermined. The axiom of collective guilt precludes the axiom of freedom of choice both logically and upon our pulses.

In characterizing disobedience as a sin worthy of severe punishment—banishment from paradise, shame, toil, death—an offense he can generously expiate for Man by sacrificing the (his) Son, God attempts to justify his dominion by pronouncing disobedience toward himself evil, allowing him to claim that Man’s evil made it necessary for him to suffer a profound loss, the death of his offspring. In place of a justification for his rule, then, God resorts to a simple guilt trip.

Man shall not quite be lost but saved who will,  
Yet not of will in him but grace in me  
Freely vouchsafed. Once more I will renew  
His lapsed pow’rs though forfeit and enthralled  
By sin to foul exorbitant desires.  
Upheld by me, yet once more he shall stand  
On even ground against his mortal foe,  
By me upheld that he may know how frail  
His fall’n condition is and to me owe  
All his deliv’rance, and to none but me. (3.173-83)

Having decided to take on the burden of repairing the damage wrought by Man’s disobedience to him, God explains his plan:

Die he or justice must, unless for him  
Some other as able and as willing pay  
The rigid satisfaction, death for death. (3.210-3)

He then asks for a volunteer. In an echo of an earlier episode in the poem which has Satan asking for a volunteer to leave hell on a mission of exploration, there is a moment of hesitation before the Son offers himself up to die on Man's behalf.

...On Me let thine anger fall.  
Account Me Man. I for his sake will leave  
Thy bosom and this glory next to Thee  
Freely put off and for him lastly die  
Well pleased. On Me let Death wreck all his rage! (3.37-42)

This great sacrifice, which is supposed to be the basis of the Son's privileged status over the angels, is immediately undermined because he knows he won't stay dead for long: "Yet that debt paid/ Thou wilt not leave me in the loathsome grave" (246-7). The Son will only die momentarily. This sacrifice doesn't stack up well against the real risks and sacrifices made by Satan.

All the poetry about obedience and freedom and debt never takes on the central question Satan's rebellion forces readers to ponder: Does God deserve our obedience? Or are the labels of good and evil applied arbitrarily? The original pair was forbidden from eating from the Tree of Knowledge—could they possibly have been right to contravene the interdiction? Since it is God being discussed, however, the assumption that his dominion requires no justification, that it is instead simply in the nature of things, might prevail among some readers, as it does for the angels who refuse to join Satan's rebellion. The angels, after all, owe their very existence to God, as Abdiel insists to Satan. Who, then, are any of them to question his authority? This argument sets the stage for Satan's remarkable rebuttal:

...Strange point and new!  
Doctrine which we would know whence learnt: who saw  
When this creation was? Remember'st thou  
Thy making while the Maker gave thee being?

We know no time when we were not as now,  
Know none before us, self-begot, self-raised  
By our own quick'ning power...  
Our puissance is our own. Our own right hand  
Shall teach us highest deeds by proof to try  
Who is our equal. (5.855-66)

Just as a pharaoh could claim credit for all the monuments and infrastructure he had commissioned the construction of, any king or dictator might try to convince his subjects that his deeds far exceed what he is truly capable of. If there's no record and no witness—or if the records have been doctored and the witnesses silenced—the subjects have to take the king's word for it.

That God's dominion depends on some natural order, which he himself presumably put in place, makes his tendency to protect knowledge deeply suspicious. Even the angels ultimately have to take God's claims to have created the universe and them along with it solely on faith. Because that same unquestioning faith is precisely what Satan and the readers of *Paradise Lost* are seeking a justification for, they could be forgiven for finding Milton's answer tautological and unsatisfying. It is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil that Adam and Eve are forbidden to eat fruit from. When Adam, after hearing Raphael's recounting of the war in heaven, asks the angel how the earth was created, he does receive an answer, but only after a suspicious preamble:

...such commission from above  
I have received to answer thy desire  
Of knowledge within bounds. Beyond abstain  
To ask nor let thine own inventions hope  
Things not revealed which the invisible King  
Only omniscient hath suppressed in night,  
To none communicable in Earth or Heaven:  
Enough is left besides to search and know. (7.118-125)

Raphael goes on to compare knowledge to food, suggesting that excessively indulging curiosity is unhealthy. This proscription of knowledge reminded Shelley of the Prometheus myth. It might remind modern readers of *The Wizard of Oz*—“Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain”—or to the space monkeys in *Fight Club*, who repeatedly remind audiences that “The first rule of Project Mayhem is, you do not ask questions.” It may also resonate with news about dictators in Asia or the Middle East trying desperately to keep social media outlets from spreading word of their atrocities.

Like the protesters of the Arab Spring, Satan is putting himself at great risk by challenging God’s authority. If God’s dominion over Man and the angels is evidence not of his benevolence but of his supreme selfishness, then Satan’s rebellion does indeed become a heroic attempt at altruistic punishment. Interestingly, William Flesch, long before beginning his research into the evolution of cooperation in humans, devoted a chapter of his book *Generosity and the Limits of Authority* to the conflict between God and Satan. The chapter, titled “The Majesty of Darkness,” points out that what originally incites Satan to rebellion is the issuing of a decree from God that all the angels are to worship the Son. “But God,” Flesch writes, “does not give Satan any persuasive reason for the law proclaiming the Son’s glorification” (238). As Satan says to his fellow angels,

...by Decree  
Another now hath to himself ingross’t  
All Power, and us eclipt under the name  
Of King anointed. (5.774-7)

Flesch attributes Satan’s grandeur to “his desire for liberty,” but he finds sufficient cause in the poem to justify the anti-hero’s fall. He writes,

His superiority to his conception of God may consist in his perseverance “in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent, in spite of adversity and torture,” as Shelley put it in his “Defense of Poetry,” but it is not at all clear how excellent

his purpose is. Empson and Bloom see *Paradise Lost* as chronicling Milton's struggle with the nobility of his own conception of Satan, a struggle that forced him into debasing or "rotting" his own noble conception as Satan's grandeur threatened to get out of hand. But Shelley's analysis of Satan in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, that he is not "exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement," seems as true of Satan early (both in the poem and in the time frame) as later. (239)

Here, Flesch is citing some of the major figures in the debate over how Milton's poem is to be read, and he's summarizing the main points in the case against Satan.

Indeed, Satan poses a serious threat to the theory currently under consideration when he turns his wrath on Adam and Eve. If he harbors malice toward them—even if they are only indirect targets and the goal is to harm God—it would be difficult to convince anyone of his altruism. The critics Flesch cites have suggested that it was Milton's trick all along to make Satan grand and seductive at first, only to heighten the dramatic effect of his degradation over the course of the plot. "Most critics are now agreed," wrote William Empson in 1961,

that there is a gradual calculated degradation of Satan, but this bit of understanding gets obscured by a hunger to argue that he is very bad from the start. The chief merit of the shape of the poem, I think, which has often been called magnificent architecture, is that it presents the change in Satan with such force. We first meet him certain of the righteousness of his cause though defeated, follow him into doubt and despair, switch back in the narrative of Raphael to find him confident that his cause will be victorious as well as just, then return to the story and find his character gradually rotting away. As there is no slip-up anywhere in this involved programme, we can be sure that it was intended. (71)

For Empson, however, the degradation isn't convincing because Satan's transformation is understandable. At the same time he suggests, "one must also feel horror at the God who has deliberately reduced him to such a condition" (70). His continued sympathy for Satan stems largely from his capacity for "being struck 'stupidly good' when first confronted with Eve alone" (70). This scene occurs just before Satan finally tempts Eve. Even at this

point, when he is preparing to commit his great act of malice, he manages to be sympathetic owing to his ambivalence.

Stanley Fish, in his book *Surprised by Sin*, places Empson in the same camp as Blake and Shelley, summarizing the position of the pro-Satan party to the effect that their candidate “rescues mankind from an unvarying routine of mindless genuflection and makes possible the glorious and distinctively human search for self-knowledge and knowledge of the Truth” (x). Fish goes on to make some grandiose claims of a sort that have made him infamous himself.

By shifting the field where coherence was to be found from the words on the page to the experience they provoked, I was able to reconcile the two camps under the aegis of a single thesis: *Paradise Lost* is a poem about how its readers came to be the way they are; its method, ‘not so much a teaching as an intangling’ is to provoke in its readers wayward, fallen responses which are then corrected by one of the several authoritative voices (the narrator, God, Raphael, Michael, the Son). In this way, I argued, the reader is brought to a better understanding of his sinful nature and is encouraged to participate in his own reformation. (xi)

Though the shift in focus from the text to the reader is helpful, Fish doesn’t really offer any psychological insight into why exactly so many readers find themselves on the side of Satan and feel that the poem’s authority figures, who step in to clear up who they’re supposed to be rooting for, are arguing from flimsy premises. When Fish asserts that “Milton’s method is to re-create in the mind of the reader (which is, finally, the poem’s scene) the drama of the Fall, to make him fall again exactly as Adam did” (1), he’s merely stating the problem with a little more precision than Blake did when he accused Milton of being of the Devil’s party and not knowing it.

As Empson points out, Milton clearly signals, using the “magnificent architecture” of the poem, his intention that readers see Satan as in the wrong and God as in the right; the problem is that his character comes alive on the page in a way Milton

probably didn't foresee—and that shock of encountering a being that transcends its narrative functions is how readers recognize *Paradise Lost* as a masterpiece. Fish's reading suggests that this minor miracle was completely intentional, a trick to get readers to experience their own sinfulness, so that Milton and God can pounce after the Fall and say "Gotcha!" While this idea can't be completely ruled out, it does nothing to address the real dilemma Satan's rebellion introduces: how can anyone be sure God's authority is justified in the first place?

The case against Satan rests on his alleged ambition, which is inferred from his raging indignation at God's issuing of decrees all the angels must follow. "Satan desires to conquer God," Flesch writes in "The Majesty of Darkness,"

so that he can reign in God's place: the liberty he would achieve would be for himself alone. His rejection of Christ's authority comes ultimately from his sense that his own power is being diminished... Satan's revolt is not against tyranny. It is against a tyrant whose place he wishes to usurp. (239-40)

Readers of the poem, however, may not find Satan's fear that his own power will be diminished by Christ's authority as evidence of a will to dominate. Boehm quotes ethnographer Harold Schneider: "All men seek to rule, but if they cannot they prefer to be equal." Humans recognize in themselves and in their peers a desire for authority; that, in itself, is not generally seen as an offense. Boehm explains,

Even though individuals may be attracted personally to a dominant role, they make a common pact which says that each main political actor will give up his modest chances of becoming alpha in order to be certain that no one will ever be alpha over him. (105)

Ambition is often a quality not only tolerated but admired—right up until the point at which ambition manifests itself in the presumed authority of the ambitious. Humans tolerate individuals who want to accomplish grand feats; they bristle, however, at being



bossed around. Satan is repeatedly accused of seeking to replace God's tyranny with his own, but the way he exercises what authority he has belies this charge. Readers finish *Paradise Lost* without sufficient evidence to know one way or the other what type of leader Satan would make. He leads his cohort of fallen angels admirably, but it is possible that if he had the power God does he may give up his consensus-seeking mode of leadership.

It is the very scenes in which Satan allegedly betrays his lust for power that he in fact does the most to represent himself as a worthy leader. "A cardinal act of political deviance," Boehm observes, "is to attempt to set oneself above another person in a way that is belittling, or, worse, to try to give direct orders to one's peers" (74). While Satan does indeed set himself above his peers, the fallen angels in hell, he does not presume any ultimate authority. Sitting on his "unenvied throne / Yielded with full consent" in Pandemonium, he asks them all,

...who here  
Will envy whom the highest place exposes  
Foremost to stand against the Thund'rer's aim,  
Your bulwark, and condemns to greatest share  
Of endless pain? (2.26-30)

This question accomplishes two things: it justifies Satan's status by pointing out that he is the most willing to take on the burdens of leadership, a willingness he'll prove shortly by volunteering to embark on the risky journey to explore Earth, and it allows all the gathered angels an opportunity to object to him taking a leadership role. That no one challenges his claim that his status has been yielded with full consent vindicates him.

God commits the "cardinal act of political deviance" whenever he issues direct orders or decrees, as he does regarding the angels' subservience to the Son. Satan may

aspire to godhead or leadership, but he's much more subtle in his exercise of power. As Boehm explains,

The foragers' dilemma is to make use of the wisest heads available, yet prevent these gifted people from gaining undue political influence or power. One preventive measure is to keep the authority to decide with the group as a whole, and consensus-seeking does just that (76).

Immediately after taking his seat on the highest throne in hell, Satan calls the fallen angels together so they can collectively determine what their best course of action is.

With this advantage then  
To union and firm faith and firm accord,  
More than can be in Heav'n, we now return  
To claim our just inheritance of old,  
Surer to prosper than prosperity  
Could have assured us, and by what best way—  
Whether open war or covert guile—  
We now debate. Who can advise may speak. (2.35-42)

The scene from Book Five Flesch quotes as evidence that Satan's resistance to God's decree is justified features yet another counsel he's called to decide on a course of action. Milton felt compelled to insist before relaying Satan's speech that it's full of deception—Satan has already decided how to respond to God's decree—suggesting that he “Pretending so commanded to consult” (5.768). That he already has a plan in mind, however, doesn't really constitute an offense—as long as he gives everyone a fair chance to be heard and gets them all on board before making the decision final.

Satan even engages in a debate with Abdiel as the counsel continues, proving that he is indeed sincere in his stated purpose to give everyone a chance to speak. In fact, the critics like Flesch who accuse Satan of wanting to replace God in a position of authority are simply following Abdiel, who says to Satan that his challenge is “Expected, least of all from thee, ingrate, / In place thyself so high above thy peers!” (5.811-12) The

contradiction these critics see in Satan resisting God's authority while at the same time exercising his own authority to marshal the rebel angels' forces—assuming leadership to challenge leadership—isn't really as logically inconsistent as they make out. Boehm quotes the anthropologist Richard Lee:

Egalitarianism is not simply the absence of a headman or other authority figures, but a positive insistence on the essential equality of all people and a refusal to bow to the authority of others, a sentiment expressed in the statement: "Of course we have headmen... each of us is headman over himself." Leaders do exist, but their influence is subtle and indirect. They never order or make demands of others, and their accumulation of material goods is never more, and often much less, than the average accumulation of the other households in their camp. (Lee 457 qtd. in Boehm 61)

Boehm refers to leaders in egalitarian bands as serving the role of *primus inter pares*—first among equals. Again, the main difference between a legitimate leader and a tyrant is that the former leads by persuasion and consensus, thus protecting the autonomy of each political actor, while the latter issues direct orders and enforces them with physical threats.

There are several stirring instances in *Paradise Lost* that show God to be a tyrant and Satan to be a *primus inter pares*, but perhaps the most apposite in this context is the exchange between Abdiel and Satan that takes place as the battle in heaven is about to ensue. Abdiel shouts

... Fool! Not to think how vain  
Against th' Omnipotent to rise in arms  
Who out of smallest things could without end  
Have raised incessant armies to defeat  
Thy folly or with solitary hand,  
Reaching beyond all limit, at one blow  
Unaided could have finished thee and whelmed  
Thy legions under darkness! (6.135-37)

It's easy to see how this kind of power threatens the freedom of everyone subject to it.

God has, in fact, promised to enforce his decree in the way Abdiel refers to here.

Him who disobeys  
Me disobeys, breaks union, and that day,  
Cast out from God and blessed vision, falls  
Into utter darkness, deep engulfed, his place  
Ordained without redemption, without end. (5.611-15)

Satan's response to Abdiel characteristically shows that his resistance is principled and that the force of his message is difficult to resist.

Ill for thee, but in wished hour  
Of my revenge first sought, seditious angel, to receive  
Thy merited reward, the first assay  
Of this right hand provoked since first that tongue  
Inspired with contradiction durst oppose  
A third part of the gods in synod met  
Their deities to assert who while they feel  
Vigor divine within them can allow  
Omnipotence to none! (6.150-59)

Even what is conventionally taken as incontrovertible evidence of Satan's degradation, which may also be seen as an act of malice that undermines the theory of bad boys as altruists, his temptation of Eve, is so complicated it requires a great deal of Milton's editorializing lest it be considered something else. Satan does lie to convince Eve to taste the forbidden fruit; he enters the body of a serpent and tells her, as the serpent, the reason he's able to speak is that he ate of the tree himself. This strategy, however, relies on him recognizing her lowly political status, which allows him to tempt her by arguing that she has a right to aspire higher.

Why then was this forbid? Why but to awe,  
Why but to keep ye low and ignorant,  
His worshippers? He knows that in the day  
Ye eat thereof your eyes, that seem so clear  
Yet are but dim, shall perfectly be then  
Opened and cleared and ye shall be as gods  
Knowing both good and evil as they know. (9.703-9)

He proceeds to make a point similar to the one he made earlier to Abdiel about having to take God's word for where all the angels came from:

And what are gods that Man may not become  
As they, participating godlike food?  
The gods are first and that advantage use  
On our belief that all from them proceeds.  
I question it, for this fair earth I see  
Warmed by the sun producing every kind,  
Them nothing. If they all things, who enclosed  
Knowledge of good and evil in this tree  
That whoso eats thereof forthwith attains  
Wisdom without their leave? And wherein lies  
Th' offence that Man should thus attain to know?  
What can your knowledge hurt Him or this tree  
Impart against his will if all be His? (9.716-26)

There are obvious deceptions in this argument. Satan knows that God created the earth. He also seems to be nudging Eve toward a belief in polytheism, since he keeps referring to gods instead of God. Satan does not, however, know why God proscribed eating from the tree any more than Eve does. God never explained it; he simply said they shouldn't do it, lest they die. It was another example of his rule by decree.

Satan makes a completely valid point, moreover, in finding it suspicious that God would forbid them to eat of this particular tree, the Tree of Knowledge. God later compounds this suspicion when he responds to Man's supposed fall by saying to the angels, "O sons! like one of us Man is become" (11.84). He undermines himself still further when he explains why Adam and Eve must be cast out of Paradise.

Lest therefore his now bolder hand  
Reach also of the Tree of Life and eat  
And live for ever, dream at least to live  
For ever, to remove him I decree  
And send him from the garden forth. (11.93-97)

That “dream at least to live for ever” makes no sense because their dreaming could pose no danger. That he would slip the little correction into his explanation must have made readers through the generations wonder even more—why is God so worried about Adam and Eve being like the angels and living forever? This odd speech also reveals that God has yet to learn his lesson about those damned decrees of his. As Tyler Durden says at the end of *Fight Club*, “You can’t teach God anything” (207).

Milton, however, clearly sees Satan’s act of temptation as malicious, and he wanted readers to see it that way too. When Satan first arrives on Earth and sees Adam and Eve, he actually has intense doubts about going through with his plan, and in the ensuing monologue seems to admit that he’s letting his ambition supersede his empathy.

And should I at your harmless innocence  
Melt, as I do, yet public reason just,  
Honor and empire with revenge enlarged  
By conquering this new world compels me now  
To do what else, though damned, I should abhor. (4.387-92)

What he’s talking about here, though, is visiting on them the suffering he himself is experiencing as a result of his rebellion, which needless to say he believes is just.

League with you I seek  
And mutual amity so strait, so close,  
That I with you must dwell or you with me  
Henceforth. (4.375-9)

Satan’s great act of malice is to make an argument tinged with deception—but an argument that happens to be valid. The offense then boils down to his tricking Eve into believing a snake learned to talk by eating the forbidden fruit and not letting on that he in fact knew God was singular and created earth. In return, readers might conclude, he offers her a glimpse at the true nature of her position in relation to her husband and in relation to the angels—and in relation to God. If he’d had the luxury of a little more time

to discuss the matter with her, he may have been able to persuade Eve to join his rebellion without the deceptions, as he did a third of the angels in heaven.

The complexity of Satan's intentions comes through as well when he first hears about the "One fatal Tree." Speaking to himself, he adumbrates the argument he'll later make to Eve, suggesting that his take on the subject is honest. "Knowledge forbidden?" he asks. "Suspicious, reasonless. Why should their Lord / envy them that? Can it be sin to know" (4.515-17). He then, however, goes on to say,

...Hence I will excite their minds  
With more desire to know and to reject  
Envious commands invented with design  
To keep them low whom knowledge might exalt  
Equal with gods. Aspiring to be such,  
They taste and die: what likelier can ensue? (4.522-27)

In the scene just before he goes through with this design, he admits his plan is to harm Adam and Eve. Having returned to the garden where he is momentarily overcome with despair, he says,

But neither here seek I, no, nor in Heav'n  
To dwell (unless by mast'ring Heav'n's Supreme),  
Nor hope to be myself less miserable  
By what I seek but others to make such  
As I, though thereby worse to me redound. (9.124-128)

He makes this reminder to himself shortly before the scene in which he hesitates to go through with his plan that made Empson feel a final twinge of sympathy for him. It demonstrates two things: the first is that Satan is ambivalent, something readers see ample evidence of throughout the poem. The second is that Satan's goal is not to harm Adam and Eve, but to punish God, and that he is willing suffer infinitely to do so. Even God recognizes Satan's costly signal of moral indignation; addressing the Son, he says,

...seest thou what rage

Transports our Adversary whom no bounds  
Prescribed, no bars of Hell nor all the chains  
Heaped on him there nor yet the main abyss  
Wide interrupt can hold, so bent he seems  
On desperate revenge that shall redound  
Upon his own rebellious head? (3.80-86)

The two psychological insights that Empson and the romantic poets intuited and came so close to articulating that allow Satan to break free from the magnificent architecture of the trap Milton set for him are, first, that Satan speaks for nearly all of humanity when he insists rule by decree is unjust, and, two, that the argument about Satan being ambitious or about his resistance to God's authority being based on his own selfish desire for power is belied, again and again, by the sacrifices Satan willingly, even eagerly, makes for the sake of his rebellion.

Just like a second player who vetoes an unfair proposal in the Ultimatum Game, Satan incurs the cost of signaling his disapproval to God—and by incurring that cost, which in its infinite duration is worse than death, he is simultaneously proving his altruism and winning over readers. His only offense, moreover, is not an act of violence or theft but of persuasion. Ultimately, though he suffers God's infinite punishment in the poem, in at least some readers' minds he is vindicated while God just seems vindictive.

One final point about Satan's appealing charisma can be gleaned from the observation that the inability to conceal emotions functions as a costly signal. Empson was probably far from alone in being moved by Satan's capacity to be stopped in his tracks by the sight of Eve.

... Her heavenly form  
Angelic but more soft and feminine,  
Her graceful innocence, her every air  
Of gesture or least action overawed  
His malice and with rapine sweet bereaved



His fierceness of the fierce intent it brought.  
That space the evil one abstracted stood  
From his own evil and for the time remained  
Stupidly good, of enmity disarmed,  
Of guile, of hate, of envy, of revenge.

In an earlier scene, angels patrolling earth recognize Satan because his fallen state renders his emotions impossible for him to conceal, his supernatural ability to disguise himself notwithstanding. In this scene, too, picturing his expression is a task whose ease borders on the automatic. He doesn't stand stupid for long though.

But the hot Hell that always in him burns,  
Though in mid-Heav'n, soon ended his delight  
And tortures him now more the more he sees  
Of pleasure not for him ordained. (9.457-70)

That Satan's mission results in such inner turmoil, and turmoil that he's incapable of disguising even when he knows it'll get him into trouble, stands as proof that he's not a purely rational or selfish actor—he's forsaken heaven and he's undeniably suffering for it—and thus makes him all the more sympathetic, all the more heroic. "*Being known* through hard-to-fake or costly or honest signaling," Flesch explains in *Comeuppance*,

to have the emotional propensity to act against our own rational interests helps those who receive our signals to solve the problem of whether they can trust us. Blushing, weeping, flushing with rage, going livid with shock: all these are reliable signals, not only of how we feel in a certain situation but of the fact that we generally emit reliable signals. It pays to be fathomable. People tend to trust those who blush easily. (106)

Satan's ambivalence also further proves that his anger is not borne of any calculated strategy to maximize his own power or acquire the maximum amount of amenities. On his mission of exploration to earth, Satan agonizes over what he's done and questions his continued adamancy in seeking revenge. He says of God,

... He deserved no such return  
From me, whom He created what I was

In that bright eminence and with His good  
Upbraided none. Nor was his service hard:  
What could be less than to afford Him praise,  
The easiest recompense, and pay Him thanks?  
How due! Yet all His good proved ill in me  
And wrought but malice. (4.42-9)

Satan realizes that if he could just tolerate his subservient role his existence would be pleasant and he could escape from all the strife that is tormenting him. He goes on to consider what might happen if he were to seek rapprochement with God—but he knows himself well enough to foresee that once back in heaven he'll start chaffing under God's authoritarian decrees again.

... Therefore as far  
From granting He as I from begging peace.  
All hope excluded thus, behold instead  
Of us outcast, exiled, His new delight:  
Mankind created and for him this world.  
So farewell hope and with hope farewell fear!  
Farewell remorse! All good to me is lost.  
Evil, be thou my good. (4.103-110)

He simply will not be bought off; he instead sets his sights on earth where he will attempt to win Eve over to his cause. Satan's ambivalence not only underscores the costliness of his punishment; it is also a reaction to authority nearly everyone human will sympathize with, regardless of whether they're nomadic foragers or modern democrats. As Boehm explains,

But as human political groups become larger and more hierarchical, the psychological ambivalences of individual actors become more complicated. In addition to the triadic pull between dominance, resentment of domination, and submission, other factors enter the picture: for example, tendencies to resent control from above may be heavily tempered by appreciation of what a benevolent dominating leader does for one, as in chiefdoms or primitive kingdoms or modern democracies where largesse is redistributed from the political center. Or one may identify with a powerful leader on a chauvinistic basis, as he (or she) tries to advance the political advantage of one's nation. Or one may simply be captivated by a leader with powerful charisma. (242)

In *Paradise Lost*, though, it seems that while all the power resides with God, God simply can't compete with Satan when it comes to charisma, as Henry Townsend, in Edward Jones's *The Known World*, saw demonstrated in the anti-hero's paeon to egalitarianism in Hell:

What matter where, if I still be the same  
And what I should be: all but less than He  
Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least  
We shall be free. Th' Almighty hath not built  
Here for His envy, will not drive us hence.  
Here we may reign secure, and in my choice  
To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell:  
Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven! (1.256-63)

As the next section will explore, Tyler Durden, in Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel *Fight Club*, makes a similar bargain—exchanging an IKEA-furnished condo for a rotted-out house and routine beatings, all for the sake of freedom and as a signal of altruistic punishment.

## Part 2

### Tough Love à la Tyler Durden

*Fight Club* is one of the rare books that garner more interesting commentary on Amazon than in the pages of loftier publications like *Salon.com* or the *New Yorker*. In a 2000 review, someone with the handle Thrash Jazz Assassin insightfully labels the novel “Auto-cannibalizing satire.” “In the end,” he (or she) writes, “whether you find yourself offended or somehow even identifying with the characters—if you aren't also laughing at yourself and your own reaction then you have... missed something.” The story and its characters, foremost among them the gleaming anti-hero Tyler Durden, polarize audiences and critics alike. Still, Amazon has the novel ranked as 21<sup>st</sup> in its list of movie

tie-ins, and 25<sup>th</sup> in the category of Men's Adventure. 737 readers have felt compelled to voice their opinions, 646 of them giving it four or five stars. (Thrash Jazz Assassin only gave it three because he felt the movie was much better than the book.)

In what would turn out to be an opening salvo in the academic controversy over the story's artistic merits—or lack thereof—Henry Giroux, in his book *Public Spaces, Private Lives: Beyond the Culture of Cynicism*, faults *Fight Club* simultaneously for representing what it's meant to satirize and for failing to come up with any solutions for the issues of helplessness and alienation it attempts to take on. He writes that it is

a morally bankrupt and politically reactionary film. Representations of violence, masculinity, and gender in *Fight Club* seem all too willing to mirror the pathology of individual and institutional violence that informs the American landscape, extending from all manner of hate crimes to the far right's celebration of paramilitary and protofascist subcultures. (71)

Thrash Jazz Assassin might point out that it is Giroux himself who is the reactionary because he takes the film—and probably himself—far too seriously. Most of the criticism of both Chuck Palahniuk's book and David Fincher's movie falls flat because it focuses on the story at the level of its social commentary, completely ignoring how it functions—or malfunctions—as a narrative and how its characters behave and develop. Love it or hate it, *Fight Club* strikes a chord. More interesting by far than the question of what the novel or the movie are trying to say about capitalism—or about gender, or about violence—is the question of how the characters manage to get under so many people's skin, in both pleasing and not so pleasing ways.

One critic who appreciates the self-cannibalizing nature of *Fight Club*'s satire is Jesse Kavadlo, who fittingly looks at the story from the perspective of existentialist

philosophy, and who accuses Palahniuk of being a “Closet Moralist.” In discussing the author’s continuing appeal, Kavadlo simultaneously reveals his own fandom:

Palahniuk’s following remains strong, particularly among young men, a demographic widely known to the publishing world for its reluctance to read. This appeal is unsurprising: combining violent surrealism, suspenseful noir, and psychological and narrative twists, the novels depict middling men who find themselves raging against political, economic, and social systems... His books’ manic charm transcends a core readership of disaffected young men galvanized by the books’ stylish nihilism, violent chic, or tongue in cheek contravention. (4)

Kavadlo is no apologist for Tyler Durden though. In an uncanny echo of the debate among generations of readers over Milton’s depiction of Satan, Kavadlo expresses concern over the popular embrace of Palahniuk’s anti-hero. “Giroux’s reading is understandable,” he concedes,

*Fight Club* dares its readers to take Tyler—and his reactionary politics—at face value. But in addition to rescuing Palahniuk from his detractors, he needs rescuing from his admirers. More unsettling than Giroux’s academic denunciation is the popular readership that identifies too strongly with Tyler Durden. (11)

If it is indeed the case that audiences are intended to be turned off by Tyler at some point in the unfolding of the narrative, what prevents so many of them—Thrash Jazz Assassin notwithstanding—from doing so?

At the heart of *Fight Club* is a moral dilemma faced by the narrator (who is conventionally referred to as Jack following the practice established by the film’s script). The entire narrative focuses on Jack’s handling of this dilemma, and yet critics, if they mention it at all, gloss over it as they try to work out its relation to some overall message. Even critics as insightful as Kavadlo simply try to translate or decode the dilemma, or to place it in the context of anti-consumerism, or economic alienation, or Jack’s gender identity crisis. At the beginning of the plot, Jack is paralyzed by feelings of guilt, and he seeks to anesthetize himself by embracing nihilism and fatalism even more than

consumerism. Then Marla Singer shows up. Edward Norton, the actor who portrays Jack in the film, compares *Fight Club* to *The Graduate* in the promotional materials. Indeed, over the course of the plot, Jack learns to man up, as it were, and begins taking responsibility for his actions. It's not so much that Marla inspires him to grow up so he can be worthy of her; it's rather that she makes him realize his nihilism and fatalism are a flimsy act—a lie. He can't convincingly claim to be moribund as he thrills to her “Italian dark leather sofa lips” (36). So, he has to come up with another solution to his dilemma. That's where Tyler Durden comes into to the story.

The story begins at the end, with Jack and Tyler atop the Parker-Morris Building waiting for the bombs that will demolish it to detonate. Tyler has a gun stuck in Jack's mouth, and this is where the flashback begins. “I know all this,” Jack says, “the gun, the anarchy, the explosion is really about Marla Singer” (14). Jack meets Marla at a meeting of a support group for men with testicular cancer. The point of the support group is to give members the opportunity to cry, which Jack gets in the habit of doing. “Crying is right at hand in the smothering dark,” he says, describing the experience of being embraced by Bob, a man whose hormonal imbalance has led to the formation of “bitch tits,” “closed inside someone else, when you see how everything you can ever accomplish will end up as trash./ Anything you're ever proud of will be thrown away” (17). The shocking thing about this scene is that Jack finds this proof of life's futility appealing. He likes the support group. In fact, he attends the meetings for several others, even though he doesn't have testicular cancer or any of the other illnesses the groups are meant to help their members cope with. Jack is addicted to support groups. He explains,

“This is when I’d cry because right now, your life comes down to nothing, and not even nothing, oblivion” (17). Why would Jack think oblivion is a good thing?

The immediate answer is made clear when Jack reveals, “This is as close as I’ve been to sleeping in almost two weeks” (17). Indeed, Jack attended his first support group meeting at the sarcastic behest of his doctor, whom he’d sought out for a treatment for his insomnia. After three weeks without sleep, Jack pleads with the doctor to give him some pills, insisting that he’s in pain. “My doctor said, if I wanted to see real pain, I should swing by First Eucharist on a Tuesday night” (19). Jack does just that. The reason the doctor refused to write a prescription, though, is telling: “My doctor said, ‘Insomnia is just the symptom of something larger. Find out what’s actually wrong’” (19). Many critics see this as an invitation to treat the story as a Rorschach and launch into declamations of how society or capitalism or gender politics are to blame, but Palahniuk actually provides ample evidence for determining what Jack’s real problem is. That problem, moreover, is much more specific, and much less abstract than even critics like Kavaddo recognize.

To be fair, Palahniuk endows his narrator with a great deal of caginess with regard to what’s really bothering him. Jack sneaks the revelation—or splices it—into his discussion of traveling for his job and of Tyler’s habit of splicing pornography into family movies as he works as a projectionist. “Wherever I’m going,” Jack explains,

I’ll be there to apply the formula. I’ll keep the secret intact.

It’s simple arithmetic.

It’s a story problem.

If a new car built by my company leaves Chicago traveling west at 60 miles per hour, and the rear differential locks up, and the car crashes and burns with everyone trapped inside, does my company initiate a recall?

You take the population of vehicles in the field (A) and multiply it by the probable rate of failure (B), then multiply the result by the average cost of out-of-court settlement (C).

A times B times C equals X. This is what it will cost if we don't initiate a recall.

If X is greater than the cost of a recall, we recall the cars and no one gets hurt.

If X is less than the cost of a recall, then we don't recall. (30)

Jack can't sleep at night because he has a furiously guilty conscious. It's easy to imagine a family member of one of those people who burned to death when the rear differential of their car locked up confronting him, raging, teary-eyed, asking, "How do you sleep at night?"

The question now becomes, why does Jack continue going to work? Palahniuk provides readers with a clear answer to this question as well. Jack admits to being a "slave to my nesting instinct." He's not alone: "The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue" (43). His IKEA collection isn't merely an abstract symbol of consumerism. Palahniuk employs a great deal more ingenuity than that. Jack's consumer goods are the stakes he wins from his immoral exchange. His dilemma is completely understandable in terms of even the most mundane moral reasoning. Kids just a few years older than the infants in Karen Wynn and Kiley Hamlin's experiments would probably be quite capable of understanding that Jack is profiting from the exploitation of other people who are being harmed. In game theory terms, Jack is both a first-order free-rider, because he's taking a cut of the gains, and a second-order free-rider, because he lets his boss get away with keeping the policies in place. "I know where all the skeletons are," Jack says. "Consider it my job security" (31).

The psychological hold the narrative has on readers at this point derives from Jack's signals of remorse. If he were a purely rational and selfish actor, the way he earned



his livelihood would cost him no sleep. Already, though, Jack is, as it were, beating himself up—a practice he'll engage in literally later in the story. Recognizing his insomnia harkens to his guilt also solves the mystery of why attending support group meetings helps him sleep. Upon hearing the news that Chloe, a woman afflicted with a brain parasite, "finally died," Jack responds,

Oh, this should be so sweet. For two years, Chloe's been crying in my arms during hug time, and now she's dead, dead in the ground, dead in an urn, mausoleum, columbarium. Oh, the proof that one day you're thinking and hauling yourself around, and the next, you're cold fertilizer, worm buffet. This is the amazing miracle of death, and should be so sweet if weren't for, oh, that one. Marla. (35)

Jack can wallow in the pointless futility of life, and even allow himself to be exonerated by it—after all, as screenwriter Jim Uhls has him repeat in the movie version in the middle of an explanation of his job, "On a long enough timeline, the survival rate of everyone drops to zero." The support groups sound the clarion call of nihilism and fatalism, and they thus let Jack off the hook for the selfish and antisocial means with which he keeps his apartment done up in the latest IKEA styles.

While those who respond favorably to Milton's Satan can be separated from those who come away from the poem appalled according to whether or not they feel some bedrock of authority is necessary for a functioning society, readers' and viewers' responses to *Fight Club* can be divided almost perfectly according to those who get the story and those on whom it's completely lost—almost because many fans misinterpret it in the same way critics like Giroux do, latching on to precisely what he's disturbed by. For the subset of readers who understand and sympathize with Jack's dilemma, the story promises to track his efforts to deal with his guilt in some way other than trying to reject any and all notions of moral responsibility. One of the things that make this process

confusing is that following it over the course of the plot involves disentangling Jack's fatalism and nihilism from Tyler's lessons about self-destruction, which, incidentally, echo Satan's pronouncements in many respects.

Just like Satan, Tyler is a costly signaler and an altruistic punisher. One of his most altruistic deeds, which ironically turns out to be less obviously altruistic with the revelation that he and Jack are the same person, is to help Jack become a costly signaler and an altruistic punisher himself. The first step along this path for Jack is giving up all his "flaming worldly possessions," a relinquishment Tyler forces on him when he blows up his apartment. The second step is fight club: "Most guys are at fight club because of something they're too scared to fight. After a few fights, you're a lot less afraid" (54). It's no coincidence that the haunting presence of Jack's boss looms over the early parts of the story. In the movie version, he answers Tyler's question about whom he'd most like to fight, "I'd fight my boss."

Aside from the difficulty of sifting the nihilism from the costly signal of self-destruction, the other source of confusion about *Fight Club* comes from there being two overlapping plots within the story. The first centers on Jack's attempts to come to terms with the culpability he fails to escape for his complicity with the car company he works for. To do this, he needs Tyler. Unfortunately, once Tyler has free reign for a while to initiate a legion of men into the grandeur of adult manhood by training them to take risks and suffer pain and privation for the sake of protecting their own and others' individual sovereignty, he ends up going too far, getting Bob (he of the bitch tits) killed, killing Jack's boss—comeuppance for all the lives he's allowed to come to fiery ends to protect his company's bottom line—and even going so far as to threaten Marla's life. *Fight*

*Club*'s second plot centers on Jack's attempts to bring another of what Christopher Boehm calls domination episodes to an end. However, just as generations of readers have failed to be convinced by the magnificent architecture of Milton's poem that was designed to signal Satan's degradation, many readers—and probably even more viewers—of *Fight Club* fail to grasp the urgency of Jack's efforts to stop Tyler.

The novel and Uhls' screenplay diverge in some interesting ways. The film does a much better job indulging the audience's desire to see Jack's boss get his comeuppance. It also portrays Jack's own punishment—at the hands of Tyler, but with his grudging consent—much more clearly. On the other hand, the necessity of reigning Tyler in at the end is much more difficult to appreciate in the movie than in the novel because he never kills anyone; he only vaguely threatens Marla. Tyler, played by Hollywood star Brad Pitt, thus becomes all the more difficult to discern from other bad boy characters in movies who make audiences constantly wonder what they'll do next while never really believing they're quite capable of true malice. Whereas in the novel, only a page in, readers find out the space monkeys in the Parker-Morris Building are sending office furniture and equipment through the windows several floors up and watching them "disappearing into the packed crowd" (12), the movie has Pitt's Tyler assure Jack all the people have been cleared out of the building: "We're not killing anyone man—we're setting them free."

The scene in the movie that has Jack finally standing up to his boss is a wonderful illustration of how costly or altruistic punishment works. Before he's ready for this display, however, he has to assimilate more of Tyler's teachings about self-destruction. Soon after Tyler starts up a relationship with Marla—after he's gone to her apartment,

ironically, to prevent her from committing suicide—he introduces Jack to the history of soap and, simultaneously, the importance of sacrifice.

Tyler says I'm nowhere near hitting bottom, yet. And if I don't fall all the way, I can't be saved. Jesus did it with his crucifixion thing. 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. (70)

In the midst of their joint soap-making enterprise, Tyler takes time out to give Jack a big wet kiss on the hand. He then pours lye on spot he's thus covered with saliva. "This is a chemical burn," he says, "and it will hurt worse than you've ever been burned" (73).

Tyler recounts the history of how soap was discovered as Jack writhes in pain. Over hundreds of years, humans were burned alive as sacrifices. The ashes mixed with rain and, seeping into a nearby river, turned to lye. People soon realized their clothes got clearer if they washed them at that spot along the river. "It was right to kill all those people" (77), Tyler insists. "Someday," he says to Jack, "you will die, and until you know that, you're useless to me" (76). The soap they create at their ersatz factory, using fat they steal from the waste bins of a liposuction clinic, is of course also a perfect, Swiftian symbol for the blithe and oblivious way people make deals similar to the one Jack made with the car company every time they buy products without the least concern for their provenance.

Though in the novel Jack simply wakes up at his office desk, smells gasoline on his hands, and learns later that Tyler has poured the gas into a hole drilled into his boss's computer's cathode ray tube, causing it to explode when he turns it on, the scene in the film that shows Jack's boss getting his comeuppance does more to direct the audience's

attention to the offenses that make the punishment necessary. “Let’s pretend,” Jack enjoins his boss as he addresses him over his desk,

you’re the department of transportation, ok. Someone informs you that this company installs front seat mounting brackets that never pass collision tests, brake linings that fail after a thousand miles, and fuel injectors that explode and burn people alive. What then?

Jack proposes his boss keep paying his regular salary, even though he’ll no longer be coming into work, in exchange for his silence. This exchange may not seem any less selfish than his original arrangement, but Jack doesn’t keep the money. He gloats, after triumphing in the negotiation, “We now had corporate sponsorship. This is how Tyler and I were able to have fight club every night of the week.” It’s also how they’re able to start up Project Mayhem, a campaign intended at least in part to redress wrongs against unsuspecting consumers of the sort perpetrated by the car company.

When Jack first makes the threat, though, his boss assumes he’s bluffing. The threat lacks credibility because by exposing the company’s crimes Jack would be simultaneously revealing his own complicity. A rational actor, therefore, would never make good on the threat—just as a rational actor would never veto a cut of any size in the Ultimatum Game. Jack has to give his boss a costly signal of his ability and willingness to be irrational (and game theorists would call his display rational irrationality). So, he proceeds to punch himself in the face, throw himself atop a glass coffee table, shattering it—“That hurt,” he says casually—pick himself up, and throw himself into a glass credenza. His boss, dropping the phone he picked up to call security, watches in shock. Jack explains in voiceover narration, “Under and behind and inside everything this man took for granted, something horrible had been growing.” The camera lights on business cards, then on a nameplate, and then on the phone. This series of images resonates with

the earlier inventory of household kitsch Jack had purchased from IKEA. The scene is a wonderful illustration of Tyler's principle of self-destruction as liberation. It's also a wonderful illustration of altruistic punishment, since the cost incurred by the punisher is a pure signal of disapproval, so pure in fact that Jack's boss is never physically harmed.

After confronting his boss, Jack is no longer a second-order free-rider, but he still got away with living off of his ill-gotten gains for years before Tyler came around. He's therefore due for some punishment for his own first-order free-riding. The novel has Jack leaving work with the smell of gasoline still on his hands and getting into a car driven by a man referred to as the mechanic, who serves as a mouthpiece for Tyler. Crossing the center line of a highway and directing the car into oncoming traffic, the mechanic asks Jack and some space monkeys—fight club veterans who've become foot soldiers for Project Mayhem—what they will wish they'd done before they died. "My job," Jack responds, "I wish I'd quit my job" (144). The mechanic returns back to proper lane, but then he crosses back again, this time saying, "What will you wish you'd done before you died?" (145). This time Jack answers, "My wish right now is for me to die. I am nothing in the world compared to Tyler" (146)—who, unlike in the film version, is responsible for punishing Jack's boss, by killing him. Jack grabs the steering wheel and wrestles with the mechanic, who tries to steer them back to safety. The mechanic ends up knocking him unconscious—"I almost broke the steering wheel with your head" (147)—and narrowly saving them. The film version has Tyler crashing them into a car parked on the shoulder and then rolling into a ditch. "I'd never been in a car accident. This must've been what all those people felt like before I filed them as statistics in my reports," Jack narrates. Pulling

Jack from the wreckage, Tyler characteristically exalts, “We just had a near-life experience!”

This crash scene marks the end of the first plot, as Jack soon discovers both that Tyler is his alternate personality and that Project Mayhem is a larger, more dangerous enterprise than he knew. The message of self-destruction and breaking attachments to material goods and physical strength, Jack realizes, can be taken too far. The problem is he can’t convince anyone else of this. None of the fight club members or space monkeys recognizes that Tyler has become a dangerous despot because he cleverly engages in various forms of self-effacement like Boehm describes as common among successful leaders in foraging societies. “The new rule is that nobody should be the center of fight club,” the mechanic explains to Jack.

From now on, when a leader starts a fight club, when everyone is standing around the light in the center of the basement, waiting, the leader should walk around and around the outside edge of the crowd, in the dark. (142)

Tyler also cunningly ups the ante for each of the missions he sends the space monkeys on. “Every time we do these little homework assignments,” he explains, “these fight club men with nothing to lose are a little more invested in Project Mayhem” (167). After Bob gets killed on one of these homework assignments and Jack realizes it’s all getting way out of hand, he tries to do something about it:

I go to a fight club tonight to shut it down. I stand in the one light at the center of the room, and the club cheers. To everyone here, I’m Tyler Durden. Smart. Forceful. Gutsy. I hold up my hands for silence, and I suggest, why don’t we all just call it a night. Go home, tonight, and forget about fight club. I think fight club has served its purpose, don’t you? Project Mayhem is cancelled... A man is dead, I say. This game is over. It’s not for fun anymore. (178)

The crowd's response is simply to ignore him—the typical response among nomadic foragers to a leader who issues direct orders—and begin the ritual recitation of the rules of fight club. When it's time for the first two men to fight and Jack doesn't leave, they hoist him up and body-surf him to the door. He protests, "But I'm Tyler Durden. I invented fight club. Fight club is mine. I wrote those rules. None of you would be here if it wasn't for me. And I say it stops here!" (179) All of his statements are self-undermining, and they only serve to solidify Tyler's authority because everyone is convinced they're actually a divesting of authority. He's trained them for this response by toggling back and forth between personalities, and they've learned not to take Jack seriously. At one point, Tyler even gives the space monkeys the assignment of castrating Jack. "You're a brave man," one of them says, "to make yourself a homework assignment." "I really admire what you're doing" (187), he says. The self-destructive nature of Tyler's message, and of Tyler himself, makes them irrefutable.

Though the space monkeys don't go through with the castration assignment—in the film, Jack escapes—Tyler does go on to give Marla a black eye, and he kills a second person. "You shot the mayor's special envoy on recycling!" (196) Marla informs Jack. Tyler commits no murders in the film version, and he never strikes Marla—again, he only vaguely threatens her, suggesting, "She knows too much." Then again, he's also the one who saved her life when she tried to kill herself. Consequently, it's almost understandable that so many of the fans of the movie failed to catch on to the danger and absurdity of Tyler's mission—though one would hope the vast majority of them came to their senses when they absorbed their first punch to the face while trying to emulate him. In both the movie and the novel, though, Jack realizes the only way to finally stop Tyler



is to beat him at his own game of self-destruction. Atop the Parker-Morris Building, he takes the gun of his own accord, replaces it in his mouth, and pulls the trigger. Just as Thrash Jazz Assassin points out, though, the theme of self-destruction itself must also be made to seem absurd, and so Jack doesn't end up dying. "The bullet out of Tyler's gun, it tore out my other cheek to give me a jagged smile from ear to ear. Yeah, just like an angry Halloween pumpkin. Japanese demon. Dragon of Avarice" (207).

Fittingly, the final pages of *Fight Club* feature an exchange between Jack or Tyler and God, who as part of his hospital dream asks why he caused so much pain. "Didn't I realize that each of us is a sacred, unique snowflake of special unique specialness?"

I look at God behind his desk, taking notes on a pad, but God's got this all wrong.  
We are not special.  
We are not trash or crap, either.  
We just are.  
We just are, and what happens just happens.  
And God says, "No, that's not right."  
Yeah. Well. Whatever. You can't teach God anything. (207)

He's not just repudiating God, his boss, and the IKEA culture here; he's repudiating Tyler Durden too. He's also highlighting the differences between nice guys and bad boys that make the latter so appealing. Nice guys cherish the approval of father-figures, like their bosses, because they crave reassurance. This craving makes it all the more difficult for them to challenge authority, even when they believe the authority figure is in the wrong. Bad boys get their reputations for being bad, not because they hurt people—they generally don't—but because they bypass conventions and disobey orders. Being bad entails risks and costs, but bad boys tend to be clever and charming, and the more they get away with the more right it seems that they receive special dispensations. But what makes them truly irresistible is their willingness to forego pleasures and amenities, to

take on pain and misery, and completely self-destruct if necessary, in the service of righting injustices. It all depends on whose eyes the bad boy is seeking redemption in.

How Tyler saw it was that getting God's attention for being bad was better than getting no attention at all. Maybe God's hate was better than his indifference... The lower you fall, the higher you'll fly. The farther you run, the more God wants you back. (141)

Kavadlo claims that "Palahniuk has pioneered a new genre, the fiction of self destruction" (20). He may have a point with reference to the fact that Palahniuk's novels collapse in on themselves or auto-cannibalize. But self-destruction as a theme and a character trait is as old as the heavens.

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Teacher's Aid	IPFW English Department 2008-Present
Copywriter	Aptera Inc. 2011-Present

### Conference Presentations

"A Darwinian Approach to <i>Waiting for Godot</i> ?"	IPFW Student Research and Creative Endeavor Symposium 2010
"The Evolution of Fiction."	IPFW English Coterie First Annual Colloquium 2010
"They Comes a Day: Celebrating Cooperation in <i>A Gathering of Old Men</i> and <i>Horton Hears a Who!</i> "	Midwestern Graduate Liberal Studies Conference 2012

### Academic Awards

Franz Boas Award for High Scholastic Achievement in Anthropology	IPFW 2000
William James Award for Achievements not Fitting Other Categories in Psychology	IPFW 2000
Henry Kozicki Graduate Writing Award for Best Scholarly Essay on Literature	IPFW 2011