

Fight Club



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHUCK PALAHNIUK

Chuck Palahniuk grew up in Burbank, Washington. His parents divorced when he was 14—an event that would greatly influence his writing. As a young man he held a number of odd jobs, including working as a diesel mechanic, and also volunteered at homeless shelters and hospitals. Palahniuk didn't begin writing until he was 30. After publishers rejected his first novel, he set to work on his most famous book, *Fight Club*, which made him a minor literary celebrity after its publication in 1996, and a major literary celebrity after it was adapted by the director David Fincher into a cult movie starring Edward Norton and Brad Pitt. The novel and film were so popular and influential that copycat fight clubs arose across the country—including one on the Princeton University campus. Palahniuk's more recent novels haven't had the same impact cultural impact as *Fight Club*; nevertheless, he remains a highly popular novelist, and two of his other books, *Choke* (2001) and *Rant* (2007) have been adapted as films.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Fight Club doesn't allude to many specific historical events, but it satirizes the rise of consumerism over the course of postwar American history. Following World War II, America became the world's wealthiest and most powerful country, to the point where the average American (though not every American) was more prosperous than all but the wealthiest people in many other countries. With the new prosperity in America, though, came a new wave of alienation: some Americans, even (and especially) well-off Americans, confessed to feeling that their lives were meaningless—they didn't lack for anything materially, but felt that they had nothing to live for. The "alienation of prosperity" is a key theme of *Fight Club*, and also inspired films like *Rebel Without a Cause* (1953) and *The Graduate* (1967), both important influences on Palahniuk's novel and, especially, David Fincher's film adaptation.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Palahniuk lists a number of important influences on his *Fight Club*, particularly the novelist Bret Easton Ellis, whose 1991 novel [American Psycho](#) used surrealism and sardonic humor to satirize the commodification of modern America. It's also worth noting Palahniuk's respect for the philosophers Michel Foucault and Albert Camus, whose writings of alienation and violence prefigure *Fight Club*. Camus' minimalist, deadpan writing style, especially in his 1942 novella [The Stranger](#), was an

important influence on the style of *Fight Club*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Fight Club*
- **When Written:** 1994-1995
- **Where Written:** Portland, Oregon, USA
- **When Published:** August 17, 1996
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism, punk
- **Genre:** Transgressive fiction, Contemporary novel
- **Setting:** Contemporary America
- **Climax:** The Narrator shoots himself
- **Antagonist:** It's unclear: Tyler Durden could be considered the antagonist, or, more abstractly, corporate America and consumer culture
- **Point of View:** First person (The Narrator)

EXTRA CREDIT

Family connections. Palahniuk is a distant relative of the Academy Award-winning Hollywood actor Jack Palance (hence the similar surnames).

The fight that started it all. Palahniuk has stated on several occasions that he got the idea for *Fight Club* after going on a camping trip and getting in a bad fight that left his face horribly bruised. When Palahniuk showed up for work a few days later, he was amazed to find that colleagues refused to acknowledge his beaten face, avoiding eye contact with him at all times. The surreal incident formed the basis for Palahniuk's most famous novel.



PLOT SUMMARY

The novel begins with an unnamed Narrator sitting on the top floor of a skyscraper that's about to explode, with a man named Tyler Durden pointing a gun into his mouth. The novel is told almost entirely in flashbacks.

Some time before, the Narrator develops insomnia. Bored with his corporate, consumerist lifestyle, he starts attending cancer support groups, despite the fact that he doesn't have cancer. The support groups allow the Narrator to express strong emotions and sleep well. But soon, another "faker" begins attending the groups: a woman named Marla Singer. Marla explains that she goes to the support groups because she wants to feel "close to death."

The Narrator takes a vacation and, on a beach, he meets a

strange man named Tyler Durden, who gives the Narrator his phone number. When the Narrator returns home, he finds that his condominium has exploded. With nowhere else to go, he calls Tyler, who allows the Narrator to crash at his house for a while. One day, Tyler convinces the Narrator to hit him as hard as he can; reluctantly, the Narrator does so. Tyler and the Narrator then realize that they love fighting, because it makes them feel alive and “real.”

While the Narrator sleeps at Tyler’s house, he continues working at his corporate job, which requires him to travel around the country calculating the cost of recalling dangerous cars his company has built. Tyler, meanwhile, works odd jobs as a waiter at a hotel and a projectionist in a movie theater. Tyler uses his jobs to sabotage society: he urinates in fancy dishes at the hotel, and splices single frames of pornography into family movies. Tyler and the Narrator found a secret society called “fight club,” in which members fight one another in order to get in touch with visceral reality and their own masculinity.

Tyler receives a call at his house from Marla, and goes to Marla’s hotel. Following this incident, Tyler and Marla begin having loud, frequent sex in the house, irritating the Narrator. Tyler tells the Narrator not to mention him in front of Marla, or the Narrator will never see Tyler again. Tyler also shows the Narrator his other source of income: making **soap** and selling it to fancy department stores. During one soap-making session, Tyler kisses the Narrator’s hand and pours lye it, giving him a scar that looks like “**Tyler’s kiss**.” Tyler insists that he’s trying to get the Narrator to embrace death and pain so that he can find enlightenment.

Marla regularly stops by Tyler’s house to drop off shipments of collagen, removed from her mother’s aging body by liposuction. Secretly Tyler converts the collagen into beautiful, creamy bars of soap, which he sells for a big profit—when Marla finds out, she’s furious. The Narrator notices that he, Tyler, and Marla are never in the same room together.

Marla calls the Narrator and asks him to examine her for breast cancer; they learn that she does have breast cancer, and afterwards, Marla begins attending cancer support groups for real. Meanwhile, the police call the Narrator and tell him that they suspect that someone—possibly the Narrator himself—blew up his condominium. Meanwhile, fight club becomes bigger and bigger, to the point where other chapters spring up across the country.

Tyler forms a new secret society within the secret society, called Project Mayhem. Tyler subjects his Project Mayhem recruits to a brutal initiation process, and afterwards urges them to sacrifice their own happiness and identity for the good of the movement. Tyler hosts hundreds of Project Mayhem members in his house, all of whom are slavishly loyal to him. He also sends out his followers on missions to “destroy society,” often through bombings or vandalism. The Narrator continues to keep Marla company and support her through her struggle

with cancer.

One evening, The Narrator gets a call at work from Tyler, telling him to get into a Project Mayhem car waiting for him. The Narrator does so, and the driver, a mechanic, swerves the car on and off the road while asking The Narrator, “What did you want to do before you died?” The Narrator answers, “Quit my job.” As they drive, the Narrator becomes so depressed with the meaningless of his own life that he tries to drive the car into oncoming traffic—the Mechanic prevents him from doing so.

While Project Mayhem goes on as usual, Tyler disappears altogether. The Narrator, confused, tries to track down Tyler by going to different bars and clubs. Each time, the bartenders address him as “Sir.” Eventually, the Narrator realizes the truth: everyone thinks that *he* is Tyler Durden. The Narrator calls Marla and she, too, addresses him as Tyler. Suddenly, Tyler appears before the Narrator and explains that he’s the Narrator’s alter ego. He and the Narrator share the same body, but Tyler is braver and more charismatic than the Narrator—he’s The Narrator’s unconscious, the wish fulfillment of his repressed desires. The Narrator has been the one having sex with Marla, organizing Project Mayhem missions, and converting human fat into soap and explosives. The Narrator, frightened of what he’s becoming, tells Marla the truth.

The Narrator tries to shut down Project Mayhem and the fight club, only to realize that “Tyler” has prepared his loyal followers for such a possibility: the members throw the Narrator out and begin keeping tabs on him. The Narrator discovers that his boss has died in a freak explosion, and he realizes that Tyler and Project Mayhem are responsible. Project Mayhem tracks down the Narrator, addressing him as “Mr. Durden,” and prepares to castrate him for his disloyalty. The Narrator loses consciousness.

The Narrator wakes up in the ruins of his old condominium, (he hasn’t been castrated). He considers committing suicide, but realizes that he cares about Marla and has to protect her. He finds Marla, who tells him that “he” (as Tyler) has murdered more people. The Narrator loses consciousness again, and finds himself at the top floor of a skyscraper (right where he was at the beginning of the novel). Tyler explains that “they” will now die in a blaze of glory.

Suddenly, Marla and the members of her cancer support group walk into the skyscraper, where they find the Narrator pointing a gun at himself. The timer for the bomb goes off, but nothing happens—the Narrator realizes that Tyler and Project Mayhem must have used faulty explosives. Nevertheless, he shoots himself in the face.

In the final chapter of the book, the Narrator reveals that his suicide attempt didn’t work: he shot through his neck and ear, leaving him injured but alive. Tyler hasn’t disturbed him since his suicide attempt. Marla writes him letters while he recovers in the hospital. Occasionally, members of Project Mayhem stop

by and, addressing him as “Mr. Durden,” say that they’re eager for him to get back to work.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The narrator of the novel is never referred to by name. At the beginning of the novel, the Narrator is a frustrated corporate slave, living out a dull, emasculated life. The Narrator soon begins to hallucinate Tyler Durden, his powerful, charismatic alter ego, and host weekly fight clubs designed to help members embrace the physical and the visceral (the Narrator doesn’t realize that he and Tyler are the same person until the end of the book). The Narrator struggles to embrace pain and death as eagerly as Tyler, but he’s more cautious about the morality of the fight club, especially after members begin planning terrorist strikes and assassinations. In the end, the Narrator seems to “hit rock bottom” and embrace death by attempting to kill himself: whether he remains the Narrator afterwards, or whether he merges with his alter ego is left for the reader to decide.

Tyler Durden – Tyler Durden is the Narrator’s imaginary alter ego, the embodiment of his “death drive” and repressed masculinity. In many ways, though, Tyler is more “real” than the Narrator himself, as suggested by the fact that he has a name and the Narrator does not. Tyler is charismatic, cunning, and ambitious, and when “the Narrator” (speaking as Tyler Durden) speaks to the members of fight club, they respect him enormously; indeed, they refer to the Narrator as “Mr. Durden” (since, from their perspective, the Narrator and Tyler are one and the same). Tyler’s lack of inhibition and his desire to be “real” leads him to embrace pain and danger at all times. Eventually, Tyler becomes more powerful than the Narrator, to the point where he takes control of the Narrator’s body for most of the time (when the Narrator is supposedly sleeping), and sends members of fight club and Project Mayhem on increasingly dangerous and destructive missions. In the end, the Narrator seems to “defeat” Tyler by shooting himself in the head—suggesting that the Narrator has embraced his “death drive” and perhaps become one with Tyler.

Marla Singer – Marla Singer is the only major female character in *Fight Club*, and a vague “love interest” for both Tyler and the Narrator. Like the Narrator at the beginning of the book, Marla is fascinated with death and the “real.” First she seeks out death-like experiences by attending cancer support groups, and later by attempting to overdose on Xanax. While Marla shares with the Narrator/Tyler a desire for danger, she objects to many of the ways that Tyler and the Narrator pursue danger; she’s furious when she learns that the Narrator/Tyler has been converting her mother’s fat into soap, and she calls the police when she finds out that the Narrator/Tyler has been planning

murders. Marla, in short, is obsessed with death, but also seems to believe in right and wrong—in the end, she and the Narrator share a similar worldview, and finally admit that they “like” each other.

Walter – A young, handsome executive who sometimes works alongside the Narrator—and also the young, handsome host of a dinner party. (It’s not clear if the two characters are meant to be the same or not; Palahniuk could also be making a joke about the name “Walter” as referring to a kind of generic, bland, submissive man.)

MINOR CHARACTERS

Bob / Robert Paulson – The Narrator first meets Bob at a testicular cancer support group, where he learns that Bob, a former champion body builder, lost his testicles after abusing steroids. Eventually, Bob joins fight club, because he sees it as a way to reclaim his lost masculinity through pain and violence.

Chloe – A woman who is dying of cancer, whom the Narrator meets at a cancer support group.

Nina – A woman who hosts a fancy dinner party, only to discover that Tyler may have urinated in one of her perfume bottles.

The Mechanic – A loyal member of fight club, who drives the Narrator off the road in an effort to get him to embrace life, and later attempts to castrate the Narrator.

Raymond Hessel – A man whom the Narrator threatens to kill, with the goal of inspiring Raymond to embrace his life.

Patrick Madden – A city official who Tyler has murdered.

The Narrator’s boss – The Narrator’s unlikable, smug boss, whom Tyler eventually murders.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



CONSUMERISM, PERFECTION, AND MODERNITY

In order to understand what motivates the characters of *Fight Club*, we have to understand what they’re fighting against. Overall, much of the novel’s project involves satirizing modern American life, particularly what the novel sees as the American obsession with consumerism and the mindless purchasing of products.

At first, the protagonist and Narrator of the book is portrayed as a kind of slave to his society’s values; he describes himself as

being addicted to buying sofas and other pieces of furniture. The Narrator is trapped in a society of rampant consumerism, in which people are pushed (both by advertisements and by a general culture of materialism) to spend their money on things they don't need, until buying such things is their only source of pleasure. The richest characters in the novel are so obsessed with buying *things* that they lavish fortunes on incredibly trivial items like perfume and mustard, while the poorest starve. As with any addiction, the characters' consumerism is endless—no matter how many products they buy, they always feel an unquenchable thirst for more.

Another important aspect of modern American life, as the novel portrays it, is the emphasis on beauty and perfection, whether in a human body or in something like an apartment. "These days," the Narrator's alter ego, Tyler Durden, says, everybody looks fit and healthy, because everybody goes to the gym. In contemporary American society, the "perfect man" is supposed to be well-off, well-dressed, fit, own lots of nice furniture, and have a pleasant attitude at all times, ensuring that he impresses everyone around him. The novel suggests that America's obsession with beauty and exercise and its obsession with consumer goods are one and the same: they're both rooted in a desire to appear "perfect"—essentially to "sell themselves." The result is that human beings themselves become "products," just like a sofa or a jar of mustard.

In contrast to consumerism, the novel depicts traditional sources of fulfillment and pleasure, such as family and religion, as either nonexistent or fragmented. The Narrator barely knows or speaks to his father, and none of the characters in the novel are presented as believing in God—the implication being that consumerism has become America's new "religion" (but, of course, a religion that doesn't offer any profound meaning about life, or even real happiness). In structuring their lives around transient, superficial pleasures like the purchasing of products, consumers deny themselves any deeper emotional or spiritual satisfaction—a vacuum that Tyler's fight club (and then Project Mayhem) attempts to fill.



MASCULINITY IN MODERN SOCIETY

Nearly all the characters in *Fight Club* are men (the one notable exception is Marla Singer), and the novel examines the state of masculinity in modern times.

The novel suggests that modern society emasculates men by forcing them to live consumerist lives centered around shopping, clothing, and physical beauty. The novel further suggests that such traits are necessarily effeminate, and therefore that because American society prizes these things it represses the aspects of men that make men, men. In short, the novel depicts the men it portrays as being so emasculated they've forgotten what being a "real man" means.

Fight club emerges as a reaction to this state of affairs, with the purpose of allowing men to rediscover their raw masculinity. But what, according to *Fight Club*, is masculinity? Based on the philosophy of the fight clubs themselves, being a masculine, "real" man means being willing to feel pain, and dole pain out to other people. For Tyler Durden (and perhaps Palahniuk as well) masculinity is, above all, a physical state: an awareness of one's body, and a willingness to use one's body to satisfy deep, aggressive needs. As such, the fight clubs offer the men a thrilling sense of life that the rest of their existence sorely lacks.

But as the novel pushes toward its conclusion, its portrayal of masculinity becomes more complicated. Ultimately, the novel comes to suggest that raw, unchecked masculinity can be just as if not more harmful than an emasculated, consumerist society. Tyler Durden and his followers in "Project Mayhem" engineer a series of dangerous terrorist attacks, and the Narrator begins to see that Project Mayhem, with its overly eager embrace of the more "primal" aspects of masculinity—notably, aggression and violence—is too destructive, and must be stopped.

To state an obvious and troubling fact, fight club is a men's club. The men who join believe that traditionally effeminate values and behaviors are destroying them—or, worse, that women themselves are the enemy (as the Narrator says, "Maybe another woman isn't what I need right now"). Many critics have argued convincingly that the novel (and Palahniuk) ultimately shares the characters' implicitly and sometimes explicitly misogynistic attitudes, pointing to the lack of any strongly articulated alternative to the characters' views, and to the absence of any major female characters other than Marla Singer. Other critics have argued that the Narrator's feelings for Marla (and her reciprocal feelings for the Narrator) suggest an alternative to pure, unfiltered masculinity, and therefore a critique of the characters' misogyny.

While the members of fight club and Project Mayhem dismiss women and femininity altogether, toward the end of the book the Narrator goes to Marla for help while fighting Tyler and Project Mayhem. Perhaps, through the Narrator's alliance with Marla, Palahniuk is trying to suggest that the answer to society's problems (perceived effeminateness) isn't to "swing back" in the opposite direction and be hyper-masculine, but to embrace some values that are stereotypically masculine (such as strength) and some that are more stereotypically feminine (such as compassion)—values that in fact aren't masculine or feminine, but simply human.



DEATH, PAIN, AND THE "REAL"

Most of the characters in *Fight Club*, including the Narrator and Tyler, are attracted to pain and fighting—on the most immediate level, they go to fight club in order to hurt themselves, as well as each other, and most of the characters are obsessed with death. In large part,

the novel's characters behave masochistically because they consider death and pain to be more "real" than the lives they lead outside the fight club. But how does the novel define the "real?"

As the novel portrays it, the Narrator and millions of other people like him live meaningless, superficial lives, dominated by purchasing goods. By starting the fight club (and visiting cancer support groups before that), the Narrator and Tyler are trying to exist "in the moment"—they want to feel pain in order to move closer to a visceral, physical world that they cannot access in the course of their ordinary lives. The relationship between death, pain, and reality is summed up by Marla Singer, who tells the Narrator that she wants to get as close as possible to death without actually dying. The goal of the fight club, then, is to bring its members closer and closer to death in order to get them to truly embrace life—that's why Tyler pours lye on his recruits' hands, urges his recruits to get in fights and lose, and sends them on dangerous missions—to feel pain, to experience fear and danger, and in so doing to feel the thrill of life.

It's not clear to what extent Palahniuk means to satirize the fight club and to what extent he agrees with its principles, however. A major contradiction in the fight club is that to be truly "successful" in experiencing death and embracing life, you would actually have to die—in which case you'd never get to embrace "real" life at all. Furthermore, the very nature of the fight club is such that the means of experiencing pain and danger necessarily involves *inflicting* pain on another as well—and this "other" might not be such a voluntary participant in the endeavor (as in the fights people start outside of the fight club, or the victims of Project Mayhem). Overall, the novel leaves it unclear if Tyler and the Narrator's experiments with pain and death actually provide real meaning and fulfillment or just a kind of selfish, thrill-seeking illusion of meaning that ultimately leads to destruction.

At the end of the book, the Narrator tries to kill himself with a gun, but botches the attempt: he *wants* to die, but survives. It would seem that the Narrator has lived up to the principles of Tyler's "death-worship"—he's truly willing to lay down his own life. But what kind of life the Narrator is now "free" to live is left to our imagination—Palahniuk doesn't, or can't, represent it in the novel. If being "real" is about visceral, physical experience in the face of death, then by definition such a feeling can't be conveyed with words on a page—any attempt to convey it would ring false. But by the same token, the ending leaves it unclear whether there is such a thing as "the real" that's worth aspiring to, or whether the fight club's realness is just glamorized, meaningless pain.



REBELLION AND SACRIFICE

Fight Club is a story of rebellion: frustrated, emasculated men rebelling against what they perceive as an unjust, effeminized society that

forces them to live dull and meaningless lives.

At first, Tyler, the Narrator, and their followers at fight club "rebel" in an individual, relatively self-contained way: they fight with each other in order to inject masculinity into own lives. By beating each other up, the members of fight club give up their own complacency and safety for the sake of pain and "realness," proving to themselves that they're not slaves to consumerist society and a culture of shallow comfort. In this case, the members of fight club are "rebellious" against their society by escaping from it. They're not trying to fight that society directly.

But over the course of the novel, Tyler decides that personal rebellion isn't enough: one must change the world, not just the self. Much as the fight club was based on the idea of achieving freedom through pain, Project Mayhem, Tyler's attempt to rebel against the world, is centered around the concept of sacrificing oneself for a larger cause. (He even nicknames his followers "space monkeys," after the test animals that died in outer space so that, later on, humans could survive there.) At first Tyler insists that the followers of Project Mayhem be willing to sacrifice their property and their identities as individuals in order to destroy a civilization he sees as tyrannical and oppressive. Tyler's rebellions against society soon become more violent and more centered on achieving complicated, external goals, however. Furthermore, Tyler's own "society," Project Mayhem, becomes just as repressive and evil as the society he's trying to destroy.

In the end, the novel seems to suggest, *any* rebellion against the established order eventually devolves into its own kind of tyrannical establishment—perhaps necessitating a brand-new rebellion, and so on. When the Narrator begins to work against Project Mayhem, Palahniuk leaves it unclear if the Narrator is rebelling against Tyler's tyranny or if he just doesn't have enough faith in Tyler's plans. As with the novel's take on the "real," Palahniuk arguably *cannot* commit to depicting what a "perfect rebellion" would look like, because in doing so, he would be imposing his own "tyrannical" view on the reader (not to mention that giving such a nihilistic, misanthropic novel an explicit moral would contradict the basic mood of the story). Instead, he leaves it up to the reader to decide.



REPRESSION AND THE UNCONSCIOUS MIND

One of the most famous elements of *Fight Club* is the "twist" ending: the Narrator and Tyler Durden, seemingly two different characters, are actually just two sides of the same person. The narrator, dissatisfied with his dull, consumerist life, gradually and unknowingly imagines Tyler, his alter ego, in order to escape reality: Tyler is the person the Narrator *would* be if he could get over his own inhibitions (Tyler is confident, daring, aggressive, charming, etc.).

The narrator's involuntary creation of Tyler echoes some of the

ideas of Sigmund Freud, the psychologist who first proposed the idea of an unconscious mind. Freud argued that all human beings have an unconscious mind, with its own unique, instinctual desires and emotions. Normally, humans can't directly interact with their unconscious minds, except during sleep. Similarly, the Narrator has an "unconscious" alter ego, Tyler, who takes over the Narrator's body when the Narrator is asleep. (There are also many moments when both Tyler and the Narrator seem to be awake and active—but the novel doesn't fully explain how this works.) But Palahniuk pushes this idea a bit further. While Tyler is the projection of the Narrator's unconscious mind, his creation is also a result of the surrounding culture of consumerism and materialism that forces the Narrator to live a sheltered, repressed existence. His unconscious "masculine" thoughts therefore have no outlet—they build up, develop a personality of their own, and eventually come "alive." In a way, the repression implicit in modern society *creates* Tyler. In this way, Palahniuk suggests that the Narrator's desire for escape, and therefore the creation of his alter ego, are necessary reactions to the conditions of contemporary American life. Put another way, there is a suggestion that the narrator is a stand-in for all men in modern American society; that the narrator's neuroses is one that all American men share.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



TYLER'S KISS

After he initiates each new member of Project Mayhem, Tyler Durden kisses the member's hand and then pours lye on it, giving the member a horribly painful, kiss-shaped scar. The scar, "Tyler's kiss," symbolizes the "painful pleasure" of Tyler's philosophy and his tutelage. Tyler is tough on his followers, including the Narrator, but he believes that he's helping his followers by leading them to enlightenment: the excruciating pain of the lye is supposed to get them closer to the "real."

While Tyler's kiss is arguably about achieving individual enlightenment and a sense of aliveness, the fact that *all* of his followers receive the same mark also shows how self-contradictory Project Mayhem really is. The group is supposedly about bringing down mindless, repressive consumer culture, but in the process it becomes similarly mindless and repressive—all the members have the same mark on their very bodies, receive the same indoctrination into Tyler's ideas, and are expected to give up their identities and lives for the "greater good."



BIRTHMARK

The Narrator has one telltale feature: a birthmark on his foot. As a younger man, the Narrator learns that the birthmark greatly resembles (but is not) an early-stage tumor, which could have engulfed his entire body, killing him. The birthmark symbolizes the constant presence of death in the Narrator's life: the birthmark is a reminder that the Narrator *could* be dying of cancer right now. The Narrator's most unique feature—the one that allows strangers to identify him to a certainty, and which thus plays a convenient role in the novel's plot—is his birthmark, an essentially meaningless part of his body, over which he exercises no control. Thus, the birthmark could be said to symbolize the Narrator's uniqueness (as opposed to **Tyler's kiss**, which is shared by of Tyler's followers), but also the flimsiness of the very concept of individuality.



SOAP

Tyler Durden is an enthusiastic maker of soap; he renders fat (sometimes human fat) and converts it into luxurious, expensive soaps that he sells for a hefty profit. As Tyler explains, the process of making soap is incredibly brutal: animals have to be slaughtered, bodies have to be harvested, just to produce a state of cleanliness. Soap—not just the object but the process of *making* it—is a symbol of the brutality and violence of the "real world," a world that most people would prefer to ignore. Furthermore, soap is a symbol of the pain and sacrifice needed to keep the world turning, and of the invisible dirtiness involved in the way that people keep themselves clean.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the W. W. Norton edition of *Fight Club* published in 2005.

Chapter 1 Quotes

●● I know this because Tyler knows this.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Tyler Durden

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

The novel begins with the narrator and Tyler Durden, the two main characters, sitting in the top floor of a huge skyscraper, waiting for it to blow up. Tyler is in control of the

situation—he's got a gun pointed at the Narrator. There is a strange, almost psychic connection between the Narrator and Tyler: The Narrator knows that the building is going to blow up, he claims, because "Tyler knows this."

Palahniuk won't properly explain the nature of the connection between the Narrator and Tyler until near the end of the novel, when he reveals that the Narrator and Tyler are really the same person: the Narrator has imagined an alter ego, Tyler, who does everything the Narrator is too repressed or afraid to do in his ordinary life. The relationship between Tyler and the Narrator is a good example of the "uncanny": the tone, in art and literature, of uneasiness, often created by the juxtaposition of two people or objects that have an affinity in spite of their obvious differences. Tyler and the Narrator are opposites in many ways (one is cautious, the other is reckless, one is charismatic, the other isn't), but they share a basic psychic connection.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ "Funerals are nothing compared to this," Marla says. "Funerals are all abstract ceremony. Here, you have a real experience of death."

Related Characters: Marla Singer (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, the Narrator meets Marla Singer, the woman who's been attending his cancer support groups (including for some forms of cancer, such as testicular cancer, which she can't possibly have). Marla, just like the Narrator, is a "faker"—she pretends to be suffering from various awful diseases in order to get close to people who are actually suffering. Here, Marla gives an explanation of why she does so: she wants to get close to the "real experience of death."

Marla is fascinated by death: she seems to find it beautiful and at times almost sexually alluring. While Palahniuk doesn't tell us much about Marla's life, he suggests that Marla turns to cancer support groups for the same basic reason as the Narrator—she's sick of normal American consumerist life, and wants an alternative, a feeling of primal reality and danger. Surrounded by the specter of death and true suffering, she's found that alternative.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ My flight back from Dulles, I had everything in that one bag. When you travel a lot, you learn to pack the same for every trip. Six white shirts. Two black trousers. The bare minimum you need to survive.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

The Narrator lives a materialistic consumerist lifestyle: he buys "stuff" constantly, even if he doesn't need it in any practical sense. In order to pay for his "stuff," the Narrator has a job that requires him to fly around the country, investigating damage claims for a car company. The paradox of the Narrator's situation is that he works hard to fund his addiction to buying things, and yet as a result, he works so much that he doesn't often get a chance to savor his possessions—most of the time, he's traveling from hotel to hotel, in which case he has only the "bare minimum."

The passage illustrates the contradictions inherent in consumerist culture. In such a culture (which is, according to *Fight Club*, the culture that all contemporary Americans live in), people should always be spending their money on more products. The problem with such a way of life is that new products never bring their purchasers any lasting happiness, both because a product provides only temporary, superficial happiness, and because (as the Narrator's situation demonstrates) consumers work so hard to afford their possessions that they never get a chance to enjoy them.

☝☝ Then you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

The Narrator comes home from a business trip to find that his condominium, in which he keeps all his "worldly possessions," has exploded mysteriously. The Narrator is shocked to find that his furniture, food, and bed have been

destroyed—in a way, he’s more concerned about what’s happened to his possessions than he is about what’s happened to his neighbors during the explosion. In spite of his concern for his property, the Narrator seems to reach a couple key insights after the explosion. He realizes that his property hasn’t brought him any lasting happiness: he continually buys new products (like sofas), hoping that they’ll make him happy, but of course they never do (and aren’t even designed to do so—if one product made people completely happy, they’d never buy another, and the businesses selling products would go bankrupt). The desire for material possessions controls much of the Narrator’s life—they compel him to work hard at his job, live in his condominium, etc. As the Narrator puts it in this pithy statement, his possessions have come to “own” him.

●● Tyler said, "I want you to hit me as hard as you can."

Related Characters: Tyler Durden (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Up to this point in the book, the Narrator has only flirted with pain and suffering—by attending cancer support groups, he’s vicariously experienced the suffering of other people. The Narrator finds that a proximity to death and other people’s suffering gives him a cathartic release, and he’s able to go through his life with a sense of greater peace and satisfaction. But in this passage, the Narrator’s new friend, Tyler, takes the Narrator’s interest in pain one step farther: he asks the Narrator to cause him *direct* physical pain.

As we’ll come to see, Tyler wants to feel physical pain because he believes that pain is the key to being truly alive and experiencing the “real.” This is a vague, never properly defined concept that encompasses a sense of aliveness, energy, physicality, and visceral sensation that, according to Tyler, is sorely lacking in modern America. Tyler, and later the Narrator, gravitate toward pain and sacrifice because they believe it can lead them to a higher state of consciousness—but whether they’re right, or just fetishizing pain for its own sake, Palahniuk leaves to readers to decide.

Chapter 6 Quotes

●● The first rule about fight club is you don't talk about fight club.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

This is probably the most famous line from the novel (and later, the movie)—it’s been scrawled on high school bathrooms, quoted at parties, parodied on TV shows. But what does it mean, and why is it so important to the themes of the book?

Tyler and the Narrator start the fight club to give its members a way to get in touch with the “real.” Through pain and suffering, fight club members aim to transcend the pettiness and tawdriness of their daily existences. Fight club, however, must be kept a secret, both in a practical sense (the law might not take kindly to a group of adults beating each other up) and in a more abstract sense, too: by keeping quiet about their violent actions, members make fight club a kind of “sacred space,” in which anything goes and where no impulse is forbidden, no matter how sadistic or masochistic. If the public were to find out about fight club, fight club would no longer be a “sacred space.”

Another thing worth noting: fight club would never work if it didn’t have members, and therefore it would never succeed unless people broke the first rule of fight club. Tyler often reminds fight club members that their very presence at meetings is proof that people are breaking the rules. So there is an inherent contradiction in fight club: the more it succeeds, the more it has failed to live up to its own rules. The contradiction in the fight club points to the broader contradictions in Tyler’s theories of revolution, and to the novel’s own nihilistic, contradictory ideas.

●● I'm a thirty-year-old boy, and I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer I need.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

The Narrator vents his frustration to Tyler Durden: he's 30 years old, meaning that, as far as his family is concerned, he should be getting married. The Narrator's frustration stems from the basic aimlessness of his life right now; he seems to have no purpose in life except getting a job, getting married, having children, and dying. In a broader sense, too, the Narrator sees a problem with what he perceives as the emasculating, effeminate nature of American culture. People are expected to shop a lot, worry about their physical beauty, and buy new products constantly—all behaviors that are more stereotypically female than male.

In both senses, then, the Narrator boils down his problems to femininity and even women themselves. It is no surprise that the fight club is a men's club—there are no women present (and barely any women in the novel as a whole). Fight club is designed to appeal to men who have, as per the Narrator's quote, given up on women and femininity. It's thus easy to argue that the fight club is inherently misogynistic, and many critics have pointed to the overall misogyny of Palahniuk's novel.

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

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Tyler Durden

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

Here Tyler claims that he enjoys fighting because doing so allows him to vent his hatred of his father. Tyler describes his father in vague terms that suggest that they barely know one another, and certainly don't get along. Strangely, by experiencing pain himself, and by doling out pain to other people, Tyler feels better—he's found an outlet for his hatred and frustration.

Tyler's explanation of why he enjoys fight club suggests a few things. First, it suggests that the purpose of fight club can be more positive than mere masochism. The members of fight club aren't just naturally violent people: they *turn* to violence and self-destruction as a means of getting over their problems in life. Tyler's behavior also suggests that fight club is a way of rebelling against the traditional institutions of society—institutions which have largely failed

their alleged beneficiaries (for example, the family doesn't provide stability or happiness for Tyler). At the same time, fight club could also be interpreted as a replacement for family and father—at many points, the Narrator compares Tyler to his (the Narrator's) own father.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☞ "You have to see," Tyler says, "how the first soap was made of heroes."

Think about the animals used in product testing.

Think about the monkeys shot into space.

"Without their death, their pain, without their sacrifice," Tyler says, "we would have nothing."

Related Characters: Tyler Durden, The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Tyler explains that soap, one of the key symbols of the novel, was originally produced through the practice of human sacrifice. The Celts sacrificed victims to their gods, and eventually, the remains of these victims trickled down into the river water, where chemical reactions produced lye that could be used to clean clothing.

Tyler's brief history of soap suggests a couple things. First, it suggests that civilization arises from violence and brutality. On the surface of things, there could be nothing more innocent than a bar of soap—and yet, if you study its history, the bar of soap was only produced because of disgusting, sometimes brutal processes. Furthermore, Tyler's speech suggests that he believes sacrifice to be an important value. People in modern America have largely turned away from the concepts of sacrifice and duty—they think that they can coast through life, buying products and enjoying themselves. As Tyler sees it, life is always most fulfilling and rewarding when people sacrifice their own happiness for a greater good.

Tyler's speech also hints at the contradictions in his worldview. The human sacrifices who "created" the first soap didn't go willingly to their deaths. So perhaps Tyler's talk of duty and sacrifice is meant to foreshadow the unintentional pain and violence that will result from his actions—violence which perhaps isn't as important or crucial to human progress as he claims here.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☞ New leather multiplied by labor cost multiplied by administration cost would equal more than our first-quarter profits. If anyone ever discovers our mistake, we can still pay off a lot of grieving families before we come close to the cost of retrofitting sixty-five hundred leather interiors.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

The Narrator has a “soul-crushing job” working for a major car company. As part of his job, he travels around the country to calculate the cost of a product recall. The Narrator’s company sells cars, meaning that sometimes, people get in car crashes, and sometimes, the company itself is to blame—malfunctioning cars can be lethal. Instead of recalling cars whenever there’s a mistake, the Narrator’s company only acts when doing so would save them money—i.e., when the cost of a lawsuit is greater than the cost of a recall.

The company’s actions illustrate the ruthlessness and soullessness of modern life. The only “value” to which a consumerist society subscribes is the importance of making money. Therefore, nobody at the car company intervenes to ensure a more moral outcome. Tyler’s fight club might seem brutal and harsh, but in many ways, it’s less brutal than the actions of a car company that knowingly allows innocent people to die and suffer horrible injuries just to save some money.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☞ Marla’s philosophy of life, she told me, is that she can die at any moment. The tragedy of her life is that she doesn’t.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Marla Singer

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Marla has just learned that she probably has breast cancer, and might even die soon. Marla refuses to determine whether or not her breast cancer is terminal—she lives in willful ignorance of her own (possibly) impending death.

Marla’s breast cancer is darkly humorous, because she spent years *pretending* to have cancer in order to attend various cancer support groups and vicariously experience other people’s grief. Now she actually has cancer. Marla continues to be fascinated with death, and yet her refusal to listen to a doctor—i.e., her refusal to find out when she’s going to die—indicates that she’s also frightened of death. Marla, it could be argued, enjoys the “thrill” of dying—knowing how much longer she’s going to live would reduce her thrill, then. Marla’s behavior indicates that she, as much as anyone in fight club, is fascinated by death and suffering.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☞ After the union president had slugged Tyler to the floor, after mister president saw Tyler wasn’t fighting back, his honor with his big Cadillac body bigger and stronger than he would ever really need, his honor hauled his wingtip back and kicked Tyler in the ribs and Tyler laughed. His honor shot the wingtip into Tyler’s kidneys after Tyler curled into a ball, but Tyler was still laughing. “Get it out,” Tyler said. “Trust me. You’ll feel a lot better. You’ll feel great.”

Related Characters: Tyler Durden (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tyler Durden blackmails the president of a projectionist union into paying him monthly checks forever. Tyler has been splicing single frames of pornography into family movies—if Tyler were ever to tell the press about what he’d done, then the projectionists would be forced to recall millions of dollars worth of film. The projectionists’ union is better off paying Tyler some hush money instead.

The president of the union is so furious with Tyler that he punches him in the face. Tyler, who is, of course, used to getting punched, just laughs and tells the president to “get it out.” Tyler’s behavior is mocking, proving that he’s not intimidated by the president’s violence. And yet there’s also an almost positive aspect to Tyler’s behavior—he seems to be recruiting the president for membership in fight club, urging him to give in to his inner aggression and desire for visceral violence.

Note also the language the Narrator uses to describe the union president himself—he’s built like a “Cadillac,” with

fancy “wingtip” shoes and a body that is “bigger and stronger than he would ever really need.” This again emphasizes the commodification of modern society (even a man himself is like the expensive car he owns) and the supposed emasculation of modern men. The union president has a strong, masculine body, but he’s never “needed” it in his comfortable, complacent life—until now, when he gets into a real fight and, it’s suggested, finally gets in touch with something “real.”

Chapter 16 Quotes

☛☛ When Tyler invented Project Mayhem, Tyler said the goal of Project Mayhem had nothing to do with other people. Tyler didn't care if other people got hurt or not. The goal was to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history. We, each of us, can take control of the world.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Tyler Durden

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

Tyler eventually finds a secret society within a secret society: Project Mayhem. Where fight club was focused on confronting the “real” through individual pain and aggression, Project Mayhem is designed to channel that aggression outwards. As we’ll see, Tyler uses his recruits to sabotage businesses, cause disease and chaos, and even kill people.

The founding of Project Mayhem is a major turning point in the novel because it shows Tyler becoming more reckless, more violent, and arguably more fascistic in his methods. Tyler is indifferent, according to this passage, about who gets hurt in the course of Project Mayhem. He’s indifferent to the suffering of his own followers and, it’s implied, to the suffering of “regular people” in society. This is no longer about individual “enlightenment” through fighting and suffering, but instead is about a violently enforced “collective enlightenment”—which is really just Tyler imposing his ideas on others, whether they want them or not.

☛☛ The applicant has to arrive with the following:
Two black shirts.
Two black pair of trousers.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Narrator notices that Tyler requires all Project Mayhem recruits to bring, among other things, a set of clothes including black shirts and black trousers. The passage alludes to an earlier passage (quoted above) about how, during the course of his work trips, the Narrator always brings the same set of white shirts and black trousers.

The passage symbolizes a couple things. First, the color symbolism (black shirts for Project Mayhem vs. the white shirts that the Narrator wore for work) suggests that Project Mayhem is trying to undermine civilization through chaos and violence. But at the same time, the passage could symbolize how Project Mayhem, no less than the Narrator’s old job, has ultimately come to undermine human freedom. Just like mainstream, consumerist culture, Project Mayhem limits human freedom and prevents individual autonomy. So arguably, Project Mayhem—perhaps like most revolutionary forces—is becoming as bad as the establishment it’s trying to oust from power.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☛☛ Up above me, outlined against the stars in the window, the face smiles. “Those birthday candles,” he says, “they’re the kind that never go out.”
In the starlight, my eyes adjust enough to see smoke braiding up from little fires all around us in the carpet.

Related Characters: The Mechanic, The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, the Narrator goes on a joy ride organized by Tyler Durden. The Mechanic, a “space monkey” who’s slavishly loyal to Tyler, drives the Narrator on the freeway and repeatedly swerves off the road, endangering both of their lives. In doing so, the Mechanic is trying (on Tyler’s instructions, it would seem) to compel the Narrator to embrace his life and get the same visceral thrill that he once got from fight club.

Why is Tyler doing this to the Narrator—what’s the

takeaway? At the end of the chapter—after the Mechanic nearly kills the Narrator by swerving off the freeway—the Narrator feels his own powerful urge to “fucking die.” The Narrator even tries to swerve into oncoming traffic himself, though the Mechanic stops him. The Mechanic has brought The Narrator a cake—which, due to the car’s sudden swerves, is now splattered against the side of the car. The presence of the birthday cake—which, of course, is usually supposed to represent someone’s growth and development (turning one year older)—becomes a symbol of the “downward spiral” on which Tyler wants the Narrator to embark. Tyler wants the Narrator to hit rock bottom—to lose all his “extraneous” attachments to happiness, contentment, and notions of success. To achieve such a goal, Tyler repeatedly endangers the Narrator’s life, to the point where the Narrator himself feels a desire to end his own life. The near-fatal joyride is supposed to be the next step in the Narrator’s education in the “real.” But this education is also based on destruction and nihilism, suggesting that Tyler’s “teaching methods” lead to self-hatred and self-destruction, not enlightenment.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☛ "You had a near-life experience," the mechanic says.

Related Characters: The Mechanic (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

In the previous chapter, the Narrator has almost been in a bad car crash. Driven around by the Mechanic, a willing servant to Tyler Durden, the Narrator nearly dies when the Mechanic repeatedly swerves off the road. He eventually becomes so overwhelmed with danger and depression that he tries to “fucking die,” by steering into oncoming traffic (the Mechanic manages to steer back). Afterwards, the Mechanic cheerfully tells the Narrator that their drive has been a blessing, since it brought the Narrator close to death.

Why would anyone want to have a “near life experience?” The idea of having such an experience is that one can only truly appreciate life by flirting with death and nothingness. The mindless consumers who make up most of America (according to Palahniuk, anyway) are alive, but they’re out of touch with reality. But by joining fight club, experiencing pain, and—here—flirting with death on the freeway, Tyler is trying to get the Narrator to “feel” death, and therefore,

come to embrace life. The fact that the freeway joyride inspires the Narrator to actually try to kill himself, rather than embrace life, suggests that Tyler’s methods don’t actually teach anything; they just inspire further nihilism and self-destructive behavior.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☛ Raymond K. K. Hessel, your dinner is going to taste better than any meal you've ever eaten, and tomorrow will be the most beautiful day of your entire life.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Raymond Hessel

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

In this short chapter, the Narrator, following Tyler’s orders, stops a random man, points a gun at him, and tries to bully him into changing his life. The Narrator is acting on behalf of Project Mayhem—Tyler has ordered his followers to make “human sacrifices.” The Narrator tries to make Raymond, seemingly a lonely, unhappy man, into a prouder, stronger human being. He does so by filling Raymond with fear, basically implying that Raymond is about to die. As Raymond runs away, the Narrator proudly thinks that Raymond is going to have a beautiful day tomorrow, and will really appreciate his life after his encounter with death.

The passage is a good example of how Project Mayhem is getting out of hand, and how its goals of changing the world are full of contradictions and fallacies. The Narrator is sure that he’s changed Raymond’s life for the better, but has he? It seems just as likely that Raymond will spend the rest of his life thinking about the time some faux-philosopher pointed a gun at him and yelled for a few minutes. Project Mayhem tries to use violence and danger to push people into “freedom,” but it’s not clear if violence and danger can actually be used to achieve such lofty goals, or if they just ultimately create more chaos and destruction.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☝ "What it is," Tyler says, "is we have police who come to fight at fight club and really like it. We have newspaper reporters and law clerks and lawyers, and we know everything before it's going to happen."

We were going to be shut down.

"At least in Seattle," Tyler says.

I ask what did Tyler do about it.

"What did we do about it," Tyler says.

We called an Assault Committee meeting.

Related Characters: The Narrator, Tyler Durden (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Narrator slowly becomes aware that he and Tyler Durden are the same person. He's "speaking" to Tyler, but—because of his recent conversation with Marla—he now knows that people regard him and Tyler as the same person. The Narrator comes to understand that he and Tyler share a body, but represent two different sides of the mind: the conscious and the unconscious.

Notice the use of dialogue and quotation marks in this scene. Tyler explains some of the things that Project Mayhem has accomplished recently, but even when he asks the Narrator a question about it, the Narrator seems to know the answer already—because, deep down, the Narrator *does* have access to Tyler's mind. The passage is important because it gives a new, clever meaning to the novel's repeated phrase, "I know this because Tyler knows this." The Narrator and Tyler know the same things because, quite simply, they share a mind. The Narrator is defined by his conscious mind, while Tyler represents the Narrator's unconscious, but—just as human beings can access their own unconscious thoughts in dreams—the Narrator can still grasp *some* of Tyler's thoughts.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☝ I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world. Tyler is capable and free, and I am not.

I'm not Tyler Durden.

"But you are, Tyler," Marla says.

Related Characters: The Narrator, Marla Singer (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Narrator turns to Marla Singer for help. He's just learned that he *is* Tyler Durden, or rather, Tyler Durden represents his own unconscious mind. The Narrator explains what's going on to Marla, and in the process, he comes to understand *why* he imagined Tyler in the first place. Tyler represents the Narrator at his highest aspiration: brave, smart, charismatic, etc. The Narrator is so repressed and isolated as a result of his consumerist lifestyle that he has no outlet for his unconscious impulses. As a result, these unconscious impulses have "come together" to form their own person—Tyler.

But as Marla points out to the Narrator, the Narrator can't just divorce himself from "Tyler's side" of the brain. The Narrator is still referring to Tyler as a separate person, with his own unique personality and capabilities. In reality, the Narrator and Tyler are the same person—both in the literal sense that they share a body, and in the more psychological sense that Tyler and the Narrator know the same things, have the same talents, etc. The difference is that Tyler is more in touch with his "cool" and masculine side—the aspects of Tyler's personality that people like *do* exist in the Narrator, but they're buried very deep down. The passage is important, then, because it shows the Narrator truly coming to terms with his split personality, and starting to realize that he is responsible for the often horrific things that Tyler has "achieved" through Project Mayhem.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☝ "His name is Robert Paulson."

And the crowd yells, "His name is Robert Paulson!"

The leaders yell, "He is forty-eight years old."

And the crowd yells, "He is forty-eight years old."

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Bob / Robert Paulson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Robert Paulson—Bob, the person the Narrator met at his early cancer support groups—dies. While working with his fellow space monkeys, he's shot by

police officers who mistake his heavy drill for a gun. Back among the space monkeys, Robert is canonized. Although the space monkeys are forced to give up their identities and personalities in life, they seemingly *earn* names after they sacrifice themselves for their “cause.” The passage has a ritualistic quality, as the space monkeys band together in honor of Robert’s death, sharing a unified chant.

As fight club devolves into Project Mayhem, the contradictions of Tyler’s love of danger and destruction become more and more obvious. Here, the passage suggests some of the contradictions in the space monkey’s worship of death. The space monkeys are willing to endure pain because they believe that pain leads them to enlightenment. But death, the ultimate form of pain, can lead to no enlightenment at all—because the person experiencing it is no longer alive. Furthermore, this passage shows just how much Project Mayhem is coming to resemble the “system” it’s supposedly fighting against. It’s members have no identities, names, or personalities (apart from Tyler’s indoctrination), and are only given a “name” to be held up as martyrs and propaganda pieces for other space monkeys to try and emulate.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☛☛ The three ways to make napalm. I knew Tyler was going to kill my boss. The second I smelled gasoline on my hands, when I said I wanted out of my job, I was giving him permission. Be my guest.
Kill my boss.
Oh, Tyler.
I know a computer blew up.
I know this because Tyler knows this.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator’s boss, Tyler Durden

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, The Narrator becomes aware that his boss has been murdered—and, moreover, he (or rather, Tyler, his alter ego) is to blame for his death. The Narrator remembers smelling gasoline on his hands a few nights ago—he must have murdered his boss just beforehand.

As the novel progresses, the Narrator takes more and more responsibility for Tyler’s actions. At first, Tyler seems to be an entirely different person from the Narrator, but

eventually, we learn that Tyler and the Narrator are the same. The Narrator has fantasized about killing his boss, and—via Tyler, the embodiment of the Narrator’s repressed desires—now he’s finally killed him. The repeated line, “I know this because Tyler knows this” has come to suggest that the Narrator bears at least some of the guilt for murdering his boss, even if it was the “Tyler half” of him that acted. Furthermore, the Narrator begins to see that Tyler’s motives for killing people as a part of Project Mayhem don’t necessarily have much to do with “fighting civilization”—they’re often far pettier and more personal (here, Tyler seems to kill the Narrator’s boss simply because he doesn’t like him).

Chapter 27 Quotes

☛☛ There’s Marla.
Jump over the edge.
There’s Marla, and she’s in the middle of everything and doesn’t know it.
And she loves you.
She loves Tyler.
She doesn’t know the difference.
Somebody has to tell her. Get out. Get out. Get out.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Marla Singer

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, The Narrator wakes up in the ruins of his old condo, which Tyler blew up, and contemplates suicide. He’s become aware that Tyler has murdered his boss—meaning that the police will be trying to find “him.” After a series of dissociative episodes, the Narrator comes to realize that he’s responsible for a whole string of murders. Despite the fact that the Narrator committed said murders while he was in Tyler’s mind (meaning that, in a way, he’s innocent of the crimes), he continues to feel responsible—it was, after all, the Narrator’s repressed desire to murder his boss that led to the man’s death.

What’s interesting to notice about the passage is the way that Marla’s mere existence compels the Narrator to stay alive. The Narrator wants to protect Marla from the space monkeys who are taking over society, suggesting that he has feelings for Marla. Yet the Narrator is afraid to act on his feelings, because he senses that Marla can’t tell the difference between himself and Tyler (with whom Marla has been having an affair). So in all, the Narrator’s motivation is

a combination of guilt, remorse, love, and desire—and together, they keep him from death.

Chapter 28 Quotes

☛☛ His name was Patrick Madden, and he was the mayor's special envoy on recycling. His name was Patrick Madden, and he was an enemy of Project Mayhem.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Patrick Madden

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, The Narrator becomes aware that the space monkeys, led by Tyler Durden (i.e., the Narrator himself, in a dissociative state) have assassinated a man named Patrick Madden, a politician charged with investigating recycling in the city. What's curious about Patrick Madden is that he's been killed for little discernible reason. Supposedly, he was just an "enemy of Project Mayhem," but what he was doing to undermine Project Mayhem isn't really explained (the first rule of Project Mayhem, after all, is that you don't ask questions—if your boss tells you that Patrick Madden is the enemy, he's the enemy). Thus, the passage conveys the increasingly fascist, mindlessly violent methods of Project Mayhem—the violence becomes more brutal, even as the supposed "ends" that justify the means become increasingly vague. In fighting what may well be a legitimate enemy, American consumerism, Project Mayhem has become something arguably much worse: a fascist group of terrorists.

Chapter 29 Quotes

☛☛ Tyler says, "The last thing we have to do is your martyrdom thing. Your big death thing."

Related Characters: Tyler Durden (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the novel, Tyler decides to die—and therefore, he wants the Narrator to die, too. Tyler has arranged for

"them" to die in a big explosion, masterminded by Project Mayhem's space monkeys. Why does Tyler want to die now?

Ultimately, Tyler knows that the best leaders lead by example. Project Mayhem, much like fight club, is based on the principle of the fetishization of violence and death—to be a member is to embrace death. By killing himself, then, Tyler will finally embrace death and—perhaps—achieve enlightenment (or he'll just be dead—a much more likely possibility). Tyler hopes to be a shining example to his followers, encouraging them to embrace violence all the more eagerly, and therefore take it upon themselves to destroy civilization by any means necessary. Tyler's decision to eliminate himself also indicates that Project Mayhem has become self-sustaining: its project is chaos and violence, so it doesn't even need a leader. (And with his death, he'll also eliminate any possibility of the Narrator undermining his plans.)

Chapter 30 Quotes

☛☛ "Everything's going according to the plan."

Whispers:

"We're going to break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world."

Whispers:

"We look forward to getting you back."

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the novel, the Narrator tries and fails to kill himself. He shoots himself out of a mixture of guilt, grief, self-hatred, and the desire to prevent Tyler Durden, his alter ego, from hurting anyone else. In the final chapter, though, we learn that the Narrator has survived his suicide attempt and is now in a mental hospital, where he's consistently visited by eager space monkeys who want him—that is, Tyler Durden—to return to leading them.

It's not clear if the narrator in this chapter is "the Narrator" we've come to know, or some combination of the Narrator and Tyler. The Narrator has, we can say, finally hit "rock bottom," so that he's finally willing to lay down his life (which is exactly what Tyler wanted all along). Because it's unclear who, exactly, is narrating this chapter (the Narrator or Tyler), it's hard to tell how to interpret it. A couple of important points can be made, however.

First, whoever is narrating this passage exemplifies the ideal glorified by Tyler and the fight club: someone who is totally unafraid of death. Now that this narrator has survived death, though, it's not clear if anything has really changed—it's not clear if today is "the most beautiful day of his life" (as we might expect if we bought the logic that led the Narrator to terrorize Raymond Hessel—see quote above). Maybe hitting rock bottom doesn't really lead one to enlightenment at all.

Similarly, it's unclear if the narrator of this chapter is going

to "get back" to revolting against consumerist society with Project Mayhem, or if he's given up his old ways. Ultimately, Palahniuk doesn't say whether or not he thinks Project Mayhem is a good idea, or whether it's riddled with hypocrisy and contradiction, or something of both. *Fight Club* has such a nihilistic, willfully contradictory tone and structure that for Palahniuk to commit to any one, positive point of view (i.e., "A good revolution is X," or "Enlightenment is Y") would feel like a cop-out.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

A man name Tyler Durden sticks a gun down the throat of an unnamed Narrator. The narrator contemplates the correct ways of making a silencer or mixing explosives, thinking, “I know this because Tyler knows this.” Tyler whispers, “This isn’t really death.”

The story begins “en medias res,” which means “in the middle of the action.” The first things we learn about the Narrator are that he knows a lot about weapons, and seems to have a strange, almost telepathic connection with Tyler (in spite of the fact that they seem to be enemies)—the line, “I know this because Tyler knows this” repeats throughout the book. Tyler’s first line, “This isn’t really death,” suggests that he loves flirting with death and danger (it’s not yet clear if Tyler, the Narrator, or both are intended to die).



The narrator and Tyler are sitting on the 192nd floor of a skyscraper, and the narrator thinks about what “Project Mayhem” is doing down below. Time is running out, the narrator insists—only ten minutes left. Soon, thanks to Project Mayhem’s explosives, the skyscraper will be nothing but rubble. Tyler whispers, “This is our world.”

Palahniuk doesn’t tell us what Project Mayhem is yet, but he establishes suspense immediately: the clock is, quite literally, ticking. Although the Narrator seems frightened, Tyler is eerily calm, again suggesting that he celebrates death and danger. Tyler’s mentions of “our world” might imply that he has ambitions of changing the world with the help of his followers (in Project Mayhem).



The Narrator thinks back on everything that’s happened between Tyler and himself. It occurs to him that the destruction of the skyscraper is “really about” a woman named Marla Singer, who was involved in a strange “triangle” with Tyler and the narrator. With three minutes to destruction, the narrator begins to “remember everything.”

The novel is told almost entirely in flashbacks (reminiscent of the way, according to some, “your whole life flashes before your eyes before you die”). The Narrator’s thoughts of Marla Singer establish a romantic triangle between the Narrator, Marla, and Tyler. In essence, the novel’s “project” is to explain how, exactly, the Narrator comes from point A to point B—from meeting a woman named Marla Singer to sitting in the building with Tyler and a gun in his mouth.



CHAPTER 2

The Narrator remembers hugging a man named Bob—a man with “huge sweating tits.” Bob cries and encourages the narrator to cry, too. This, the Narrator says, is how he met Marla Singer.

The chapter, told in flashback, opens with an image of emasculation: Bob is a man, but he’s depicted as being burdened with humiliatingly large mammary glands, or, in The Narrator’s rather cruel phrase, “huge tits.” With this, Palahniuk immediately contrasts the danger, pain, and “realness” of the first chapter to what is here presented as a weak, emasculated modern culture.



The Narrator explains that he was attending support group sessions. Bob's testicles were removed because he had cancer; he was also given hormone therapy, giving him huge breasts. Bob thinks the Narrator lost his testicles, too.

The Narrator attends support groups meant for people with serious medical problems, even though he's perfectly healthy. The men in such groups, such as Bob, seem almost literally, biologically feminized by this: Bob loses his testicles and gains breasts.



As the Narrator hugs Bob, he notices a woman in the testicular cancer support group—as they stare into each other's eyes, they seem to shout, "Faker!" at each other. The narrator has seen this woman in every one of the therapy groups he attends—those for leukemia, blood parasites, brain parasites. The Narrator finds himself unable to cry when the woman watches him.

The Narrator, it's becoming clear, attends many support groups for problems he doesn't have. The awareness of another person who does the same thing—another faker—makes the Narrator feel more self-conscious and guilty; he can no longer "lose himself in the moment" and cry.



The Narrator flashes back to explain how he began going to therapy for problems he didn't have. Two years before, the Narrator went to a doctor about his bad insomnia. His doctor told him, "Insomnia is just the symptom of something larger. Find out what's actually wrong." The doctor also mentioned that if the Narrator wanted to see real pain, he should go to a cancer patient support group.

The Narrator's insomnia, the doctor suggests, is symptomatic of a larger problem (although this is also a common misdiagnosis of insomnia). The larger problem presented here is the Narrator's emasculation and boredom: he lives an unsatisfying life and has a dull corporate job. The Narrator's problem, as the doctor's comment about "real pain" might suggest, is that his life is boring: everything he does is familiar and comfortable. Pain, then, is an escape from the ordinary for the Narrator, a way to experience something truly "real."



The Narrator went to a cancer support group, and indeed, he saw horrible pain. He met a woman named Chloe who was dying of cancer—Chloe was obsessed with having sex one more time, and spent all her time watching pornography. Chloe hugged the Narrator, who, she assumed, was also dying of cancer, and wept. But the Narrator didn't cry—he kept going to cancer support groups, but he couldn't cry yet.

At the cancer support group, The Narrator sees pain and death everywhere. Chloe's behavior suggests the conflicted relationship between sex and death, or, according to the psychologist Sigmund Freud (an important influence on the novel), eros and thanatos. The Narrator is fascinated with death and pain, but can't force himself to join in the cathartic crying; he still feels uncomfortable there, and his emotions are still dulled by his consumerist existence.



Then, the Narrator met Bob at a testicular cancer support group. Bob was a former body builder who used steroids. As a result of his steroid abuse, his testicles were amputated. Bob explains that he's lost most of his muscle, and his children don't return his calls. The Narrator began to cry, deeply. He found that crying at support groups cured his insomnia.

The Narrator finally finds a "friend" in the cancer support groups who is tragic enough to make him weep. Perhaps the Narrator weeps with Bob because he sees Bob's suffering as being analogous to his own: where Bob has been literally castrated, the Narrator senses that he's been figuratively emasculated by his society (a problem that much of novel goes on to address). By getting rid of his pent-up emotion, the Narrator seems to solve the "real problem" his doctor mentioned.



We return to where we were at the beginning of the chapter: the Narrator meeting the other “faker.” She introduces herself to the Narrator as Marla Singer. The Narrator imagines an elaborate scenario in which he angrily insists that Marla needs to get out—he can’t cry, and therefore can’t sleep, when she’s around. The Narrator then imagines Marla accusing him of being a “tourist.”

The passage is funny because Marla obviously doesn't have testicular cancer either, but nobody is brave enough to tell her to get out. Even the Narrator is too cautious to confront Marla directly, since he's just as big of a liar as she is. The chapter shows that the Narrator has an active imagination (he's imagining his entire confrontation). Also, the passage suggests that the Narrator is a “tourist”—in other words, he's just trying to experience cancer patients' suffering to get a little thrill of reality, without actually living the life of a cancer patient.



CHAPTER 3

The Narrator now explains how he came to meet Tyler Durden. The Narrator thinks about his old job, a job that led him to travel across the country—as a result, he was familiar with almost all major airports. Tyler, the Narrator thinks, had a job as a projectionist—again, he thinks, “I know this because Tyler knows this.” Tyler’s job involved converting single-reel versions of films into five small reels. The Narrator notes that Tyler was a night-owl—all those nights that the Narrator couldn’t sleep, Tyler was working. Tyler also held a job as a waiter at a hotel.

The passage reinforces the almost telepathic connection between Tyler and the Narrator's minds (“I know this because Tyler knows this”). And yet Tyler and the Narrator lead opposite lifestyles: the Narrator has a corporate job that requires him to follow orders, while Tyler marches to the beat of his own drum, and works during the night (suggesting for the first time that Tyler is the Narrator's “dark side”).



During his work as a projectionist, Tyler would steal slides from movies—if there was a naked woman shown in the film, Tyler would cut out single frames of her naked body. Soon, he had a huge collection of naked frames of famous actresses. The Narrator’s job involved him traveling from airport to airport; he felt that his life was “ending one minute at a time.” He always brings the same clothes: white shirts with two pairs of black trousers.

Tyler uses his jobs to undermine what big movie companies are trying to do: he's literally stealing audiences' entertainment. By contrast, The Narrator spends his job following orders at all times. The monotony of his uniform symbolizes the monotony of his lifestyle as a whole, as well as its emphasis on appearance and superficial “perfection.”



In secret, Tyler liked to splice single frames from pornographic films into family movies—sometimes, there would be single frames of an erection in the middle of a cartoon. The Narrator then contrasts Tyler’s job with his own: the Narrator worked for a major car company. The Narrator’s job was to calculate the cost of a settlement in the event that a problem with the cars caused too many car crashes. If the company could settle for less than the cost of a recall, there would be no recall.

Tyler doesn't just steal from film companies; he sabotages their products and subverts their goals of providing “family entertainment,” disobeying the rules of his profession (for example, the MPAA rating system, which is designed to prevent movie audiences from seeing certain kinds of content based on their age). In contrast, the Narrator obeys his company's dictates to the letter, even suspending his own morals for the company's sake. As he explains it, he helps his company save as much money as possible, even if doing so involves innocent people dying in their cars.



One day, the Narrator and Tyler met. The Narrator was on vacation, sitting at a nude beach and taking a nap. He woke up to find Tyler building a sculpture out of driftwood. At the right time of day, the sun would cast shadows on the driftwood to make a normal-looking human hand. Then, as the day went on the shadow of the hand would become increasingly grotesque. Tyler introduced himself, gave the Narrator his number, and left.

When the Narrator meets Tyler for the first time, he's just woken up from sleep, immediately introducing the dreamlike nature of his friendship with Tyler. Tyler's sculpture suggests the way that he uses ugly or chaotic-looking elements (like the pieces of driftwood) to make a coherent, organized plan, albeit a plan that breaks down over time (foreshadowing the way that Tyler's plans with Project Mayhem will be successful, and yet also become increasingly villainous over time). Also notice the homoerotic nature of Tyler and the Narrator's meeting: they meet on a nude beach, and Tyler gives the Narrator his number.



CHAPTER 4

The Narrator went to his usual testicular cancer support group and found that Marla was still there. The Narrator found that he still couldn't relax and cry, as usual. He kept thinking about Marla, watching him and judging him for being a faker, just like her. Later at the support group, Marla and the Narrator hug, and Marla whispers, "You're not dying either." The Narrator and Marla, still locked in a hug, surrounded by crying people, argue over which support groups to attend. They agree that the Narrator will attend some of the cancer support groups, including testicular cancer, and Marla will attend the other half.

In this scene, the Narrator and Marla strike up an unorthodox friendship based in their common sense of feeling out of place. From the perspective of rest of the group, Marla and the Narrator appear to be crying and expressing emotion, but they're really "carving up" their shares of support groups (so that The Narrator can get back to crying and feeling a cathartic release).



The Narrator asks Marla why she comes to support groups, and she explains that she loves "the real experience of death."

Marla's statement here could be a kind of thesis statement for the novel—in a world of dullness and apathy, the characters seek something "real," and seem to find it in pain and the experience of being close to death.



CHAPTER 5

The Narrator flies back to his home, only to find that the airline has retained his luggage. Apparently, the Narrator's suitcase was vibrating during baggage inspection, suggesting that it might have contained a bomb (though it's probably just an electric razor, or a dildo). The Narrator leaves the airport without a bag, only to discover that his condominium has blown up. Everything in the Narrator's life was in his condo, he thinks: his furniture, his dishware. Previously, buying furniture was like a drug for the Narrator: he'd buy "one last" sofa, only to buy another one a month later. The things you own, he thinks, ended up owning you.

The Narrator has a minor problem (he loses his bag, because the airline thinks it might be a bomb) only to face a major problem: he loses his worldly possessions because there was a bomb in his condominium (as is later revealed). The loss of his possessions forces the Narrator to confront the truth; he was addicted to buying things. In retrospect, the Narrator can see that he's devoted his life to consumerism—he's a slave to his own appetite for appliances and furniture, addicted to things.



The Narrator arrives back at his condominium to find police officers gathered outside. They tell the Narrator that he might have left his gas on, or there might have been a leak. Eventually, the gas could have caused an explosion. The Narrator is horrified at the thought that all the mustard in his fridge—14 different kinds—has been destroyed. The police officers tell him that they haven't ruled out the possibility of arson.

In a darkly comic moment, the Narrator seems more upset with the loss of his jars of mustard than with the fact that other people might have been hurt. The Narrator is so obsessed with products and appliances that he can only think about products, not people (or, put another way, his possessions take on the importance of real human beings). The passage also foreshadows the police's investigation into the explosion.



With nowhere to go, the Narrator calls Tyler Durden and explains what happened to him. Tyler is amused, and agrees to meet the Narrator at a bar. They drink heavily, and eventually Tyler offers the Narrator a place to crash. In return for the favor, Tyler asks the Narrator to hit him as hard as he can.

The passage ends with Tyler asking the Narrator to hurt him. In a way, Tyler's desire parallels the Narrator's need to go to cancer support groups: they both want to experience suffering to jolt themselves out of boredom and experience something "real." Where the Narrator has been experiencing suffering vicariously through suffering people, Tyler wants to feel actual, physical pain.



CHAPTER 6

The Narrator sits at his computer at work and tastes blood in his mouth. Tomorrow is fight club, he thinks. The Narrator's colleague, Walter, asks the Narrator how he hurt himself, and the Narrator explains that he fell. He thinks, "The first rule of fight club is you don't talk about fight club."

We've flashed ahead a few weeks, and the Narrator has already changed his life greatly. He now attends a "fight club" where, presumably, he gets injured on a regular basis. The club is extremely secret, given that there's a rule against speaking about it.



The Narrator doubles back to explain what fight club means. The world is full of fight club members—waiters, garbage men, etc. Fight club is a secret group in which members fight each other. During fight club, members become different people—then the fight club concludes, and they go back to their regular lives. Fight club began, the Narrator remembers, when he and Tyler began hitting each other for fun.

Fight club, it would seem, is open to men alone, and it primarily attracts men from lower socioeconomic groups. These men presumably embrace fighting because it's an escape from their daily lives and dull jobs—it offers a sense of visceral reality and a thrill of danger. Furthermore, fighting seems to be a way to celebrate masculinity (in a way that modern society does not, Palahniuk suggests), which is understood as being in touch with one's aggressive instincts and physical strength.



The Narrator used to get angry all the time. He had no outlet for his frustration. Then, he started going to fight club. Self-destruction, he believes, is the answer to his problems.

Fighting is an outlet for pent-up emotions; because the Narrator lives in a highly repressed society, he has a lot of emotions bottled up. Where the rest of society celebrates beautification and vacuous self-improvement, the Narrator just wants to hurt himself.



The Narrator describes attending a meeting of fight club with Tyler. The members meet underneath a bar, and every week more people show up. Tyler barks the rules of the fight club—"you don't talk about fight club"—while the Narrator remembers his own father, whom he hasn't seen since the age of six. Meanwhile, the fighting begins. After going to fight club, the Narrator thinks, watching football on television is like "watching pornography when you could be having great sex."

Tyler seems to be the leader of the fight club, while the Narrator watches from the sidelines (though this isn't quite clear—foreshadowing later revelations). Strangely, the Narrator seems to associate Tyler with the Narrator's own father, suggesting that the Narrator sees Tyler as some sort of role model. The passage also implies that the fight club becomes so popular because of its immediacy and visceral qualities: next to fight club, regular life feels like a lazy daydream.



The Narrator has always been confused. When he turned 25, he called his father, long distance, and asked him what he should do with his life. His father didn't know, but suggested getting married. Another woman, the Narrator thinks, isn't what he needs. Instead, he and Tyler go to fight club.

The Narrator rejects the traditional "path" in life: get a job, get married, have kids. Instead, the Narrator now has learned to turn to violence and fighting to satisfy his desires. The idea that the Narrator doesn't need another woman could suggest that he's rebelling against the feminization of his society with defiantly masculine behavior (brawling)—or else that the fight club (and perhaps the novel as well) is inherently built on some level of misogyny.



The Narrator flashes back to the night that he and Tyler invented fight club—the night Tyler asked the Narrator to punch him. Neither the Narrator nor Tyler had ever been in a fight before, and Tyler was desperate to feel a punch. The Narrator is at first reluctant to hit Tyler, but eventually he does. Tyler responds by hitting the Narrator. Tyler and the Narrator realize that they enjoy fighting—they keep hitting each other. Afterwards, Tyler tells the Narrator that he was really fighting his father when he hit the Narrator.

The Narrator and Tyler use fighting to get over their "demons" and deep-seated anxieties: Tyler, for example, admits that he's trying to get back at his father by hitting the Narrator. This suggests that the fight club is designed to fill a "vacuum" in society—it's designed to appeal to lonely, alienated men who don't have any real outlet for their anger, frustration, and desire for visceral experience.



The Narrator flashes forward—fight club has become a popular, secret group, and more people join every week. As Tyler points out at every meeting, the fight club only has new members because someone broke the rules and talked about fight club.

Clearly, there are many, many people who have the same frustrations as the Narrator and Tyler. Paradoxically, though, the fight clubs only become successful and popular because people break the first rule of the fight club—suggesting that its mission is inherently contradictory.



Back at his job, the Narrator sits through a meeting, and notices Walter. Walter is young and innocent, with a good job and perfect teeth. Walter stares at the Narrator's ugly, bruised face, and the Narrator leers back, sure that whatever Walter is thinking about now, it isn't "a meatless painfree potluck."

The Narrator's embrace of his own pain and suffering cause pain and discomfort in other people (those who are still blinded by their bland consumerist lifestyle, it's implied). The Narrator seems to enjoy causing Walter so much anxiety: the Narrator's ability to accept pain and even hurt himself gives him tremendous power to control and intimidate others.



CHAPTER 7

The Narrator wakes up in Tyler's dilapidated home, where he's been crashing lately. He notices a condom floating in the toilet, and remembers that the night before, he dreamed about having sex with Marla.

Later, the Narrator reports, Tyler told him what happened: the previous night, while the Narrator was asleep, Marla called from a hotel. Tyler answered the phone and learned that Marla, whom he'd never met before, was dying by suicide. Tyler called the police and ran over to the hotel, saving her life. If he had just let Marla die, the Narrator thinks, "none of this would have happened."

Instead, Tyler went to the hotel and found Marla looking weak and sleepy. He pulls Marla out of her room while the police arrive downstairs. Tyler takes Marla back to his home, where Marla tells Tyler that she has to stay up all night, or she'll die. They have sex, and the next day, Tyler wakes up to find that Marla has left, and he tells the Narrator what happened.

CHAPTER 8

The Narrator gets sent home from work because he showed up with blood all over his pants. He leaves, thinking about how he's given up his worldly possessions to live with Tyler and fight. When he's home, he can hear Tyler and Marla having sex. Over time, Marla continues to come by to have sex with Tyler, though the Narrator never sees them in the same room together.

To wash the Narrator's bloody pants, Tyler teaches the Narrator how to make **soap**. From his fridge, he pulls out a big plastic bag full of fat, which he pours into a pot on his stove. As the fat slowly cooks on the stove (or "renders"), Tyler tells the Narrator that Marla is "trying to hit bottom." The Narrator, Tyler claims, is nowhere near rock bottom—just because he's given up his property doesn't mean a thing. The Narrator's sense of eerie calm is just "premature enlightenment." Suddenly, Marla walks into the house, and the Narrator finds that Tyler is gone. Marla asks the Narrator what he's cooking, and the Narrator doesn't answer. She asks him to call her soon, and then leaves. As soon as she's gone, Tyler comes back into the room—the Narrator is reminded of the way his parents used to behave around each other.

The Narrator's life has its own "dream logic." He dreams about things that then seem to come true, or else, it's suggested, his dreams aren't really dreams at all.



How Marla gets Tyler's house number isn't explained, as Palahniuk drops more hints about Tyler's true nature. Marla, it's shown, has continued to flirt with death, hurting herself by overdosing (on Xanax, we'll later learn). The passage also reminds us that Marla is, supposedly, to blame for "all of this." We still don't know how, which makes the Narrator's apparent willingness to let Marla die seem pointlessly cruel.



Tyler "saves" Marla, not by taking her to the hospital (he actually keeps her out of the hospital) but by having sex with her to ensure that she stays awake all night. Notice that Tyler, the Narrator, and Marla are never in the same room together.



There's a clear romantic triangle between the Narrator, Marla, and Tyler: The Narrator seems to resent that Tyler is having sex with Marla, even though he doesn't say so.



In this important passage, Tyler suggests that the Narrator is a long way from hitting "rock bottom." The Narrator has allowed other people to hit him, and he seems to have embraced his own pain—yet Tyler insists that the Narrator is not yet enlightened (although Tyler doesn't explain what he means by enlightenment). The Narrator doesn't think it's odd that Tyler and Marla are never in the room with him—he remembers his parents doing the same thing, and so isn't suspicious of anything abnormal in their "love triangle."



Tyler asks the Narrator not to mention him to Marla, ever. The Narrator promises not to do so. Tyler and the Narrator then return to making **soap**: they harden the rendered fat in the fridge. Tyler points out a layer of glycerin forming on the cooling fat—a product that can be used to make the explosive TNT.

Suddenly, Tyler kisses the back of the Narrator's hand. Lye (a caustic solution used in making soap), Tyler explains, hurts horribly and will give the Narrator a scar. He then pours lye on the Narrator's hand.

Tyler's request isn't explained, and won't make sense for a long time. Meanwhile, Tyler shows the Narrator that soap (a symbol of domesticity, civilization, and ordinary life) isn't that far away from TNT (a symbol of chaos and destruction), as if civilization contains the seeds of its own destruction—an important idea in the book.



Tyler insists that the Narrator is a long way from enlightenment—fight club was just the beginning. Here, he causes the Narrator tremendous pain, as if he's trying to push the Narrator down toward "rock bottom."



CHAPTER 9

Tyler has just poured lye on The Narrator's wet hand. The pain is excruciating, but Tyler yells at the Narrator to remain calm. As the Narrator writhes in agony, Tyler reminds the Narrator that one day, he will die, just like everybody else. The Narrator tries to make himself think of his "happy place"—Ireland—but Tyler tells the Narrator to focus on here and now. The Narrator remembers being in Ireland and learning about the human sacrifices that the Celts made centuries ago. Tyler reminds the Narrator that the melted fat of the sacrifices trickled into the Irish rivers, reacting with the water to form lye. Because of the lye in the water, the Irish were able to clean themselves in the water, centuries later.

Tyler then pours vinegar over the Narrator's hand, neutralizing the burn of the lye. The Narrator sees that he has a scar on his hand, in the shape of **Tyler's kiss**. Tyler, crying with joy, tells the Narrator that he's one step closer to hitting bottom. Without pain and sacrifice, Tyler insists, "we would have nothing."

The Narrator tries to use "new age" psychological techniques to cope with his pain, but Tyler insists that the Narrator is just dodging the real issue. Instead of evading his pain, Tyler wants to make The Narrator embrace his pain. Tyler's explanation for the link between human sacrifice and cleanliness exposes the sinister link between civilization (symbolized by soap) and violence. Furthermore, his explanation suggests that all social progress requires sacrifice: without human sacrifices, the Irish wouldn't have had clean clothes.



Tyler is a cruel teacher, but he seems to be trying to get the Narrator to embrace pain instead of hiding from it. All true progress, according to Tyler, requires pain.



CHAPTER 10

The Narrator assists Tyler during his work as a waiter in a hotel. Tyler urinates in a dish of soup, and he targets the dishes that'll be served to particularly rich, powerful people.

The passage is very unclear about whether or not the Narrator is also a waiter at the hotel (more foreshadowing of the Narrator's connection to Tyler). Tyler is presented as someone both "wise" and childish, both aggressively confident and condescendingly cruel.



At another point, the Narrator recalls, Tyler worked as a waiter at a fancy dinner party; afterwards, he left a note saying, “I have passed an amount of urine into at least one of your many elegant fragrances.” Tyler admitted to his coworkers that he wrote the note, but didn’t actually urinate—he just wanted to punish the wealthy owners of the house for spending so much money on so many useless things. After the dinner party, the hostess, Nina, accused her husband, whom she addresses as Walter, of urinating in the perfume and then smashed all the bottles to the floor, cutting herself.

Tyler uses “psychological warfare” to attack spoiled, rich people. Such people, Tyler claims, are out of touch with life: they’ve distanced themselves from reality (i.e., the same reality of pain, sacrifice, and death that Tyler has tried to pass on to the Narrator). Also notice that the host’s name is Walter, the same name as the Narrator’s coworker. It’s not clear if these are two different Walters, or the same person (Palahniuk might be suggesting that “Walter” is a stereotypical name for an ordinary, unassertive man—as in James Thurber’s short story, “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty”).



The scene returns to the hotel, where Tyler is urinating in soup. Tyler and the Narrator serve the soup to a convention of dermatologists. One of the doctors, very drunk, is talking about how hepatitis viruses can survive for half a year. The Narrator asks the doctor where he can find some hepatitis “bugs,” (i.e., viruses) and the doctor replies, “everything goes to the medical waste dump.”

Tyler seems to be using his position to get information on how to gain tools to sabotage society: later on in the novel, “hepatitis bugs”—viruses that spread a serious disease—will be mentioned again.



CHAPTER 11

Over time, the Narrator learns that Tyler makes good money selling his **soaps** to fancy stores—people say his soap is the best they’ve ever used.

Stores and customers have no idea how savage and violent Tyler is; society is so obsessed with “nice” appearances that it ignores the ugly truths lurking beneath the surface.



Tyler and the Narrator sit by a used car lot, surrounded by old vehicles. The Narrator explains that he and Tyler can’t go home right now, because Marla has come by the house and accused the Narrator of “cooking her mother.”

The passage is again structured as a flashback: we’ll see what Tyler means about “cooking” Marla’s mother.



The Narrator flashes back to explain what happened. Tyler went to the post office and bluffed his way into getting Marla’s mail—“Marla can be a guy’s name.” Afterwards, he sent Marla’s mother a huge box of chocolates.

Tyler always seems to have a plan, even if the Narrator can’t figure out what the plan is (why the chocolates?). It’s comically easy for him to steal Marla’s mail, showing how weak society and bureaucracy are.



Earlier that night, Marla came to the house with a huge package, saying that she wanted to put it in the freezer. She insisted that the Narrator had told her she could—something that the Narrator angrily denies. Marla shows the Narrator what she's holding: sandwich bags full of rendered human fat—collagen. Later that night, the Narrator learns the truth from Tyler: whenever Marla's mother has a liposuction, she has the fat stored, in case she needs collagen injections. When Marla's mother has extra fat, she sends it to Marla. Now, the Narrator realizes why Tyler wanted Marla's mail, and sent Marla's mother candy. Tyler proudly tells the Narrator that he's been making a fortune with Marla's collagen—he uses it to make **soap**.

When Marla came to the house that evening, she looked in the freezer and realized that Tyler had been using Marla's mother's collagen. The Narrator explains that he used the collagen to make **soap**, and Marla is furious—she accuses the Narrator of “boiling my mother.” When she pulls one of the bags of fat out of the freezer, she accidentally rips it, spilling fat on the floor—she then proceeds to slip in the fat and fall to the ground. Back in the present, the Narrator and Tyler are sitting near the used car lot, waiting for Marla to cool down. She's probably still in their house, destroying everything.

Marla saves her mother's collagen for collagen injections down the line. In the 90s, there was a “collagen craze,” during which many women got collagen injections in their lips, giving them fuller and (supposedly) more attractive lips. Tyler, it now seems, sends Marla's mother chocolate because he knows that she uses liposuction to get rid of her fat, which Marla then takes to Tyler's fridge, and which Tyler, unbeknownst to Marla) uses to make soap.



Marla discovers Tyler's deceptions. Tyler is essentially “recycling” people: converting them back into products and objects. But the conceit of the chapter also alludes to the way that the human body itself has become a product: an object that can be improved and beautified with injections and surgeries. Critics have pointed to the chapter as a good example of the way that Palahniuk often singles out women for punishment in his fiction, and invites readers to laugh at female characters' legitimate suffering. In effect, one could argue, Palahniuk is disguising some nasty, old-fashioned misogyny as intelligent social commentary and satire.



CHAPTER 12

The Narrator sits at his desk at work. The Narrator realizes that his car company is going to have to institute a recall—a rarity. But last week, the Narrator thinks, his company declined to institute a recall for a very serious mistake: leather interiors that caused horrible birth defects. The company didn't recall their product because the cost of a recall was greater than the cost of paying off the hundreds of harmed families.

The Narrator's boss approaches him, holding a copy of the “rules of fight club,” which the Narrator has left in the copy machine. The Narrator stands up and whispers, “I'd be very careful who I talked to about this paper.” The Narrator warns that “whoever wrote that” is probably thinking about shooting up the entire office. The Narrator's boss becomes extremely uncomfortable, and the Narrator begins reading the rules of fight club, making his boss even more disconcerted.

The car company's actions symbolize the total amorality of corporations: the company intentionally allows some lives to be lost in order to save some money, because making money is the corporation's only goal. Because the corporation is under no obligation to tell its customers the truth (their product is lethal), it doesn't.



Since spending time with Tyler, the Narrator has learned to stand up for himself more, albeit mostly by becoming a bully. Instead of allowing his boss to humiliate him, the Narrator not-so-subtly threatens to shoot up the entire office. By this point the members of fight club seem to see non-members as sheep-like people who deserve to be mocked and bullied for their submissiveness.



Over the weekend, the Narrator goes to his testicular cancer support group and finds Bob there—but nobody else. Bob, excited to see the Narrator, tells the Narrator that the group has disbanded—everybody has joined a new group, the first rule of which is that “you aren’t support to talk about it.” The founder of this group, Bob says, is a “great man,” “Tyler Durden.”

Bob has joined fight club, too, though he seems not to realize that the Narrator is one of the founders. The fact that the testicular cancer support group has joined fight club reinforces the link between death, violence, and masculinity: near death, Bob and his peers fight to celebrate their manhood and the sheer fact of being alive.



CHAPTER 13

The Narrator shows up at Marla’s hotel; Marla has called him there. Marla is calm, despite the fact that she recently found out what Tyler was doing with her collagen. She says she’ll forgive the Narrator for the collagen incident if he investigates the lump on her breast—she’s afraid it’s cancer. The incident reminds the Narrator of how, long ago, he went to a medical school to have a wart removed from his penis. During his time there, the doctors noticed the **birthmark** on his ankle—a birthmark that they at first thought was a new, lethal form of cancer. Disappointed, the doctors removed the wart and let the Narrator go.

Marla seems to treat the Narrator as a close confidant, and yet, based on the novel’s depiction of Marla so far, her request for a “breast examination” seems more like a sexual flirtation. To reinforce such an ambiguity, the passage mentions another instances in which sex and death are closely tied (the wart on the Narrator’s penis). The Narrator’s birthmark further reiterates the constant presence of death in his life: to a doctor, it appears that the Narrator is going to die of cancer soon. The doctors’ vague disappointment that the Narrator doesn’t have cancer again suggests the coldness and dehumanization of modern society.



The Narrator continues to examine Marla’s breasts; as he does, he tries to make Marla laugh. He tells her a story about a woman who married a mortician; the mortician forced her to soak herself in ice water and lie perfectly still immediately before he had sex with her. As he tells the story, The Narrator thinks about the **birthmark** on his foot—a birthmark that could have been cancer. He also notices that Marla has “Tyler’s kiss” on the back of her hand.

The Narrator is genuinely trying to cheer Marla up, since he’s afraid that she’s actually going to die of cancer (and even the Narrator’s jokes underscore the close connection between sex and dying). The passage also contrasts two different marks: Tyler’s kiss and the birthmark. The former is a symbol of loyalty to fight club, acceptance of pain and sacrifice, and collectivism (since, now, other people have the same “kiss”), while the latter is a symbol of the Narrator’s individuality and uniqueness.



CHAPTER 14

With the Narrator’s help, Marla has found two lumps on her breasts, and so she starts going to cancer support groups “for real.” They go to a clinic together—the kind of place “where you end up if you don’t have health insurance.” Afterwards, Marla says she doesn’t want to know anything else about her breast cancer, especially when, and if, she’s going to die. Afterwards, Marla starts working at a funeral home. The Narrator makes a brief aside: Marla, he insists, “is still alive,” but she wishes she’d die “at any moment.”

In a bitter, even tragic, irony, Marla ends up going to the same support groups she once attended as a “faker.” It seems that Marla has breast cancer (though the novel never explicitly says so). Marla still seems fascinated by death, hence her wish to die at any moment. Yet she also seems frightened by the possibility of death, hence her refusal to get any more information about her cancer. The dangerous thrill of dying, rather than the certainty of death, is what excites her.



Meanwhile, the police begin calling the Narrator at Tyler's house, asking about his condominium explosion. Over the phone, a detective explains that a homemade bomb blew up the condo; the Narrator insists that he was in Washington D.C. that night. He insists that he would never have destroyed his beloved possessions. In response, the detective tells the Narrator not to leave town.

The police clearly suspect the Narrator of blowing up his own apartment—again hinting that the Narrator has been doing things he doesn't remember.



CHAPTER 15

Tyler meets with the head of his projectionist union chapter, and learns that he's being let go. Tyler grins and thinks about the single frames of pornography he's spliced in to hundreds of movies over the years. He talks his union into sending him a monthly paycheck to keep quiet about this fact.

Tyler is so reckless and confident that he does what most people would never have the courage to do: he blackmails his bosses into paying him to keep quiet about his years of vandalism and sabotage.



Tyler encourages the Narrator to have a similar conversation with the president of the hotel where the Narrator and Tyler work as waiters. The Narrator goes in to speak with the manager of the hotel, and gleefully tells him that he peed in the soup. The Narrator warns him that if word gets out, nobody will ever go to the hotel again.

It seems, now, that the Narrator works at the hotel where Tyler may also work (this is never properly explained, but foreshadows the novel's "twist"; similarly, it had seemed that Tyler, not the Narrator, peed in the soup in the earlier chapter—more foreshadowing). The Narrator is again learning from Tyler's example, and blackmails his boss about the Narrator's own misbehavior.



The Narrator describes how the head of the projectionist union chapter punched Tyler in fury—Tyler just laughed and encouraged the head of the union to "get it all out." When the Narrator went to speak with the hotel manager, the Narrator ended up punching *himself* in the face. For some reason, this made him remember the first fight he had with Tyler. The Narrator continues to beat himself up in front of the manager. Suddenly, a security guard walks in. Afterwards, fight club goes from a weekend event to happening seven nights a week.

The passage juxtaposes Tyler and the Narrator's encounters with their furious bosses. Tyler is seemingly indifferent to pain, since he hurts himself all the time, meaning that he has all the power over the head of the union. The Narrator goes one step further: he doesn't just accept punches; he punches himself. The Narrator punching himself is much more intimidating than the Narrator openly threatening his boss—the message seems to be that the Narrator (or any member of the fight club) can't be easily intimidated. The fact that this "self fight" reminds the Narrator of his first fight with Tyler suggests that (in light of the novel's twist ending) that first fight was self inflicted as well.



CHAPTER 16

The Narrator reads in the papers that people have bombed a skyscraper. This was all a part of Project Mayhem, Tyler's latest project. The first rule of Project Mayhem is that you don't talk about Project Mayhem. Tyler holds weekly Mayhem meetings in which he teaches people how to fire guns and make explosives.

Suddenly, there's a secret group within the secret group. Project Mayhem is like fight club, but it's more violence and with a larger social plan. Where fight club members use violence to change themselves, Project Mayhem members use violence to change the external world.



Tyler gives out weekly homework assignments for Project Mayhem, all of which involve creating chaos, anarchy, and misinformation in society. Project Mayhem members bomb skyscrapers, ruin museums, sabotage fashion shows, etc. Tyler also tells every one of his followers to get in a fight—and lose. They’re also required to buy a gun. The point of Project Mayhem, Tyler claims, is to teach every man to “take control of the world.”

Tyler invented Project Mayhem at a fight club meeting. The Narrator fought a new member and hit him until his face was “ruined.” Afterwards, he fantasized about destroying rainforests and shooting endangered species. The next day, at breakfast, Tyler told the Narrator about Project Mayhem, a plan to destroy civilization.

In the days following their breakfast, Tyler gets the Narrator to print the “rules of Project Mayhem,” and begins welcoming people into the house—they all sleep in the basement. Everyone who joins Project Mayhem must bring 500 dollars for personal burial, and bring two black shirts and two black pairs of trousers. Tyler calls his recruits “space monkeys,” comparing them to the animals who died in space so that astronauts could survive later on.

CHAPTER 17

At the house, the Narrator finds a man waiting outside. Tyler and the Narrator survey the man and Tyler mutters that he’s too young. The Narrator realizes that it’s the young man whose face he “ruined” weeks before. In an aside, Tyler tells the Narrator to ridicule everyone who stands outside the house—as an initiation test, Project Mayhem applicants must stand outside the house for days while the Narrator and Tyler criticize them. For the next few weeks, the house slowly fills with Project Mayhem recruits. Recruits render fat all day long. One day, Bob joins Project Mayhem.

Tyler encourages his followers to target places that are symbols of civilization at its best, such as museums and skyscrapers. Tyler’s message is that by accepting pain and violence in their own lives, his followers can become powerful—powerful enough to “control” the world. The problem is Tyler’s idea of control is pure anarchy and violence—and this is no longer violence as a means of self-fulfillment or enlightenment, but violence inflicted on unwilling victims.



Much as the Narrator and Tyler founded fight club because they were frustrated with their lives, Tyler founds Project Mayhem after the Narrator expresses his frustration with the monotony of his new life (i.e., his life as a fight club member). The Narrator wants to direct his aggression at other fight club members, as usual, but Tyler wants to turn his own aggression outward and use it to attack civilization itself. Note also that once again the Narrator’s fantasies or dreams lead into Tyler taking concrete action.



Remember the six white shirts and two pairs of black trousers the Narrator wore on his old business trips? Palahniuk implies that Project Mayhem is becoming as authoritarian and collectivist as the corporate culture that Jack and Tyler were trying to rebel against in the first place, as symbolized by Project Mayhem’s new “uniform.” Tyler’s talk of “space monkeys” suggests that his followers must be willing to die for a “greater good,” though he never properly explains what this greater good is.



Where the only requirement for joining fight club was a willingness to fight, Project Mayhem has a complicated initiation process—almost as if the recruits are applying for a job, or trying to join the army (suggesting the militaristic and even fascist aspects of Project Mayhem).



The Narrator leaves the house to meet with Marla. Together, they talk about their lives—Marla has breast cancer, but she wants to talk about flowers. The Narrator is careful not to mention Tyler at all.

In the following weeks, the Narrator notices that Project Mayhem members have “**Tyler’s kiss**” on their hands. Yet Tyler is almost never at home anymore. One day, Marla shows up outside and tries to see Tyler, but the members of Project Mayhem pull her away.

The Narrator looks for Tyler Durden everywhere, but never finds him. He finds himself walking around late at night, sometimes stumbling on secret fight clubs. He always asks if anybody has seen Tyler Durden, and the fight club members always say no, with a wink. The Narrator hears from Project Mayhem members that Tyler is building a secret army.

Marla visits again, and the Narrator walks outside with her. As they walk, the Narrator notices a human jawbone half-buried in the garden. Quickly, he pushes the jawbone into the soil where Marla won’t see it.

Marla flirted with death while she herself was alive and healthy, but now that Marla is actually close to death, she doesn’t want to talk about it anymore. This fact is perhaps Palahniuk suggesting some of the shallowness of fight club and Project Mayhem itself—courting death seems glamorous and masculine, but in the face of the real thing all the posturing and sloganeering is meaningless, and one can only try to find pleasure and meaning wherever one can, even if that’s just talking about flowers.



Tyler’s kiss comes to symbolize the de-individualization of Project Mayhem: everyone who works for Tyler has become essentially the same. They’ve all supposedly “woken up” and embraced the “realness” of pain and death, but in the process they’ve also become unquestioning followers of Tyler’s anarchist ideas (thus undercutting the very idea of anarchism itself). Tyler becomes increasingly secretive, even with Marla and the Narrator, suggesting that Project Mayhem is plotting increasingly larger and more violent operations.



The passage feels uncanny because of the way the fight club members wink at the Narrator: they seem to be aware of something the Narrator himself once knew but has since forgotten (foreshadowing the Narrator’s unconscious actions).



Project Mayhem is becoming increasingly violent, even murdering people in the name of “ending civilization.” But the Narrator hides the evidence of violence from Marla, perhaps horrified himself and also not wanting to remind her of her own impending death.



CHAPTER 18

The Narrator falls asleep at his desk at work. He's been especially lazy at work, and he's up for a "formal review." When he wakes up, he smells gasoline on his hands. Before he can think about this further, he gets a phone call from Tyler, telling him that Project Mayhem is waiting outside for him with a car. The Narrator goes outside, where he finds a team of fight club members waiting for him in a car, and the Narrator climbs in. He realizes that the driver is a mechanic who comes to fight club often. The Narrator asks the mechanic where Tyler is, and the mechanic replies, "your father was your model for God," something Tyler has said many times before. Gradually, the mechanic and the members in the back seat join in, chanting things Tyler has told them, such as "You're not your name." The Narrator realizes that the car is moving faster and faster—suddenly it swerves into oncoming traffic, then quickly back onto the road.

The mechanic asks the Narrator what he would have liked to do before dying, and The Narrator, terrified of crashing, isn't sure what to say—eventually, he claims he would have quit his job. The mechanic continues to swerve the car into oncoming traffic, then back onto his side of the road. The members in the back answer the mechanic's question ("build a house," "ride a horse," etc.), but the Narrator still can't answer it. He becomes intensely aware of how pathetic and meaningless his life is. Suddenly, feeling a deep urge to "fucking die," he grabs the steering wheel and swerves the car into oncoming traffic. This time, the Mechanic wrestles with the Narrator for control of the car and finally manages to swerve back onto the road. The Narrator's head slams into the steering wheel.

The Narrator, dizzy from hitting his head, rests his head in the mechanic's lap. The mechanic, still driving, smiles and says, "Happy birthday." He's gotten the Narrator a cake—which, the Narrator can see, is now splattered all over the interior of the car.

In this chapter, Tyler tries once again to push The Narrator to "rock bottom." The mechanic, acting as Tyler's proxy, is trying to frighten and unsettle the Narrator by "almost" crashing the car. While Tyler isn't present in the car, his influence pervades the entire scene: the "space monkeys" are doing Tyler's bidding unthinkingly. While the purpose of fight club was to help members immediately get in touch with their "real," visceral selves through violence, Project Mayhem involves surrendering one's own personality and individuality to suit Tyler's plans—plans which he never seems to explain.



The Narrator has no idea what to say in response to the mechanic's question. The Narrator has tried to "find new meaning" in his life by joining the fight club, but he still seems to be slipping back into a dull, meaningless existence. The space monkeys' answers to the mechanic's question don't seem much better than the Narrator's; they're overly specific and often consumerism-based, suggesting the impossibility of summing up one's "life goals," and also suggesting that though Project Mayhem might be about destroying "civilization," it doesn't offer anything to replace it with, or provide its members with a lasting sense of meaning. Although the Mechanic seems to be trying to get the Narrator to embrace his life in the face of danger, his actions seem to achieve exactly the opposite: they fill the Narrator with self-loathing, and inspire him to try to "fucking die." Thus, passage calls into question whether Tyler's violent methods can ultimately improve people's lives, or just make them into more violent, self-hating people.



The mechanic—or rather, Tyler, who's planned the whole affair—thinks of the Narrator's near-death as a gift, because it forces the Narrator to confront danger and approach real "life." The ruined birthday cake symbolizes the Narrator's supposed "growth" under the influence of Tyler. While Tyler claims that the Narrator is accessing truth and the "real," the Narrator is really self-destructing, as evidenced by his attempt to drive into traffic.



CHAPTER 19

After his near-accident, The Narrator is still in the car, driven by the mechanic, with the three other space monkeys sleeping in the back seat. The mechanic tells the Narrator that he's just had a "near-life experience."

The mechanic goes on to tell Jack that he's been running errands for Tyler, picking up fat. He speaks in phrases that the Narrator recognizes hearing from Tyler for the first time.

The mechanic drives to the medical waste dump, and there, in the medical waste incinerator, he finds bags of human fat. He'll take the fat back to Tyler's house and make it into bars of **soap**, sold for 20 dollars apiece. The mechanic mentions that he's been asked to look for some "hepatitis bugs, too."

The mechanic thinks of the Narrator's brushes with danger as valuable because they force the Narrator to get over his inhibitions and embrace "real life," even though they seem to compel the Narrator to give up on life altogether.



The mechanic is a pawn for Tyler's wishes: he has no true personality of his own anymore, showing how Project Mayhem has gotten out of hand and undercut its own anarchist, individualistic ideals.



Neither the Narrator nor any of the other space monkeys know what Tyler has planned; they're just doing Tyler's bidding. The mention of hepatitis alludes to the conversation Tyler and the Narrator had with the drunken doctor at the hotel—Tyler might be trying to cause a serious health problem.



CHAPTER 20

The Narrator stands over a man called Raymond Hessel, pointing a gun at his head. The Narrator's homework assignment from Tyler is to make 12 "human sacrifices" and get 12 driver's licenses to prove it. The Narrator tracks down a "loser" named Raymond Hessel, attacks him, and pushes him to the ground. He grabs Hessel's wallet and learns his name and address. Hessel cries pathetically as the Narrator looks through the wallet. The Narrator asks his victim, "what do you want to be when you grow up?" Eventually, Raymond cries out that he wanted to be a veterinarian. The Narrator lets Raymond stand up, and he tells Raymond to enroll in veterinary school tomorrow. The Narrator keeps Raymond's license so that he can keep "tabs." As Raymond runs away, the Narrator thinks that tomorrow will be the most beautiful day of Raymond's life. He also realizes that he's just doing Tyler's bidding.

In this short chapter, even the Narrator becomes Tyler's pawn. The Narrator tries to make Raymond think that he (Raymond) is going to die. The Narrator's goal, it would seem, is to inspire Raymond to be a better person, since the Narrator believes that being close to death and pain can lead to enlightenment. Even though the Narrator knows how painful and frightening a brush with death can be (he's just had one), he still "passes on his lesson" to Raymond. The fact that the Narrator lets Raymond live, yet also thinks that he's doing Tyler's bidding, suggests that Tyler does not want his followers to sacrifice people literally (i.e., kill them); Tyler wants them to pass on the lessons of Project Mayhem and essentially torture people into enlightenment. We never see what happens to Raymond (and it's quite plausible that Raymond's encounter with the Narrator won't make him happier or wiser at all—he'll just think that some faux-philosopher mugged him), calling into question whether Tyler's worship of death and violence leads to any real lasting enlightenment, or just a perpetual quest for greater thrills and danger.



CHAPTER 21

The Narrator travels across the country, trying to find Tyler Durden. He goes through various airports and explores bars late at night. Every time, the bartenders look beat up, and each time, they greet the Narrator as if they already know him—they always call him “Sir.”

At a bar in Seattle, the Narrator meets a bartender with a broken nose who calls him “Sir.” The Narrator asks the bartender if he’s met Tyler Durden before, and the bartender insists, “You stopped in last week, Mr. Durden.” The bartender shows the Narrator the “**Tyler’s kiss**” on his (the bartender’s) hand and claims, “you’re turning into a fucking legend, man.” He also tells the Narrator that he knows about the **birthmark** on the Narrator’s foot. The Narrator is stunned—the only people on the planet who know about the birthmark are Marla and the Narrator’s father.

The Narrator calls Marla from Seattle and asks her if they’ve ever had sex. Marla is confused—of course they have. She thanks the Narrator for saving her life in the hotel, and says she’s still angry with him for making her mother into **soap**. Stunned, the Narrator asks Marla to say his name—she says, “Tyler Durden,” the person who gave her the scar on her hand.

Again, the Narrator feels the uncanny sense that he’s been to the bars before—the truth of his unconscious activities is coming closer to being revealed.



The bartender treats the Narrator as if the Narrator himself were Tyler Durden, and shows awareness of the Narrator’s unique body (the birthmark). As we’ll see, the bartender knows about the Narrator’s birthmark because the Narrator (as Tyler) tells people about the birthmark, even though the Narrator (as the Narrator) does not.



Here, we come to the famous “twist” in the novel’s plot: the Narrator and Tyler are really the same person.



CHAPTER 22

The Narrator has just heard from Marla that he is Tyler Durden. He sits in his motel room, and eventually falls asleep. Suddenly, he wakes up—Tyler is standing right in front of him, claiming that they need to “crack down” on the police right away. Tyler angrily accuses the Narrator of talking about him to Marla, breaking his promise.

Tyler continues to tell the Narrator about Project Mayhem—there are chapters all over the country. Tyler has been visiting the same cities as the Narrator. The Narrator begins to realize the truth—he and Tyler “share the same body.”

Tyler clearly told the Narrator not to mention him to Marla because he wanted to make sure that the Narrator didn’t realize that Tyler was his “imaginary friend.” Also note again how Tyler’s appearance is associated with the Narrator “sleeping”—suggesting that he hasn’t really been sleeping at all, but only assuming the identity of his alter ego.



The Narrator has felt a sense of déjà vu while traveling through cities recently—that’s because Tyler has been there too, while the Narrator was “asleep.”



Tyler continues to tell the Narrator about “their” plans to attack the police. They attacked the Seattle Police commissioner, who’s been cracking down on fight club and Project Mayhem, and threatened to cut off his testicles. The plan worked perfectly—the commissioner stopped investigated the fight club. The Narrator realizes that he already knew everything Tyler just told him.

Tyler, we realize, has continued to use the space monkeys to enact terrorist plots, while attacking anyone who stands in Project Mayhem’s way (such as the police commissioner). Also, we finally grasp the full meaning of the repeated phrase “I know this because Tyler knows this”: the Narrator and Tyler literally share the same mind.



When the Narrator is awake, Tyler explains, he’s in control—but when he’s asleep, Tyler takes over his body. Tyler’s house is rented in the Narrator’s name; Marla has been having sex with “Tyler,” and thinks of the Narrator and Tyler as the same person—because they are. Tyler tells the Narrator that Marla loves him, or rather, “us.” Tyler Durden, the Narrator realizes, is just his hallucination. The Narrator says, “I was here first,” and Tyler replies, “We’ll see who’s here last.” Suddenly, the Narrator finds himself all alone in his motel room.

Tyler, because he’s more in touch with his libido and his instincts, can see very clearly that Marla is attracted to him—and therefore to the Narrator as well. The Narrator, on the other hand, hadn’t thought of his recent interactions with Marla as being romantic—even though, in Marla’s mind, they were. Tyler and the Narrator, it would seem, are enemies now: they’re fighting for control of “the Narrator’s” body.



CHAPTER 23

The Narrator flies home as quickly as he can. At the house, Marla is sitting inside, and she says that she and the Narrator need to talk. The Narrator eyes the freezer, and suspects that there are dead bodies inside—casualties of Project Mayhem, being converted into **soap** and glycerin.

Instead of talking to Marla, the Narrator realizes that Tyler (or rather, he) has been organizing increasingly violent operations for Project Mayhem; now he suspects that Project Mayhem has killed people and stores the bodies in the freezer.



Hurriedly, the Narrator takes Marla out of the house to the nearest Denny’s. There, the waiter, who looks seriously injured, greets the Narrator and calls him “Sir.” He offers Tyler and Marla food, free of charge, which Marla accepts.

The Narrator has followers around the country, since so many dissatisfied people have joined Project Mayhem. The omnipresence of space monkeys is more sinister than reassuring (and also pretty implausible), particularly since the space monkeys are loyal to Tyler, not the Narrator.



The Narrator tries to convince Marla, and himself, that he’s not Tyler Durden, but Marla claims, “Everyone knows you’re Tyler Durden.” The Narrator realizes why he started hallucinating Tyler: he wanted a change in his life. He was sick of his dull, corporate lifestyle—so he took a vacation, and created an imaginary friend, Tyler. As he explains this, Marla is amazed and amused. Tyler, The Narrator realizes, is the Narrator’s own ideal man—strong, smart, witty, fearless.

The Narrator realizes that his repression and boredom are to blame for his hallucination (and his insomnia). He’s finally found the “real problem” that his doctor alluded to at the beginning of the novel: in a bleak, emasculating society, the Narrator began imagining Tyler to escape from himself.



CHAPTER 24

The Narrator returns to the house to find that Bob is dead. Bob and other members of Project Mayhem were out on a routine “homework assignment”—destroying a payphone. During the operation, the police thought that Bob was holding a gun instead of a drill, and they shot him. After Bob’s death, the remaining Project Mayhem members repeat Bob’s real name—Robert Paulson, and that night, in fight club meetings across the country, members chant, “Robert Paulson” again and again.

While Palahniuk questions the space monkeys’ plans at many points in the novel, here most of his criticism is directed at the police: the police murder Bob because they mistook a drill for a gun, a clear example of excessive force. The Narrator is sympathetic to Bob and seems to genuinely care about him (in a way, Bob is almost as much the cause of the novel’s events as Marla Singer, since it was with Bob that the Narrator first cried). In life, the space monkeys are dehumanized, but in death they acquire an identity and a name. Yet the process by which they acquire a name symbolizes Project Mayhem’s almost religious collectivism and “death worship.”



The Narrator, furious, remembers meeting Bob long ago, when he was still going to support groups. He goes to the nearest fight club meeting and yells out that fight club and Project Mayhem are over. The members of Project Mayhem march toward the Narrator, chanting, “Prepare to evict the member.” The Narrator shouts, “I’m Tyler Durden,” but the fight club members throw him out and lock the door.

The Narrator thinks that the group has taken things too far: in trying to lash out at civilization, they’ve caused people to die needlessly. But the Narrator finds that the members of fight club are loyal to Tyler, not him. Fight club and Project Mayhem are designed (by Tyler himself) to survive without a leader: even after the Narrator/Tyler protests, the group knows to carry on without him.



CHAPTER 25

The Narrator goes to stay with Marla in her hotel to ensure that he won’t go to sleep and “become” Tyler. She suggests that they go bowling—they won’t be able to sleep, and therefore, Tyler won’t be able to do anything. The Narrator and Marla take “upper” pills and get on the bus, and the driver lets them ride for free—the Narrator realizes that Project Mayhem members are watching him at all times, keeping tabs on his behavior.

The space monkeys are watching the Narrator at all times, making sure that he doesn’t do anything else to sabotage Project Mayhem. Now that the Narrator knows about Tyler, he can try to control Tyler’s actions by deliberately not sleeping.



CHAPTER 26

The Narrator takes the bus to work the next day, and he notices police barricades around the building. He realizes that his boss is dead from a freak computer explosion. The Narrator knows this, “because Tyler knows this.” The Narrator thinks back to the other night, when Tyler called him on the phone and told him to go outside to the mechanic’s car. That night, the Narrator remembers, he smelled gasoline on his hands. The Narrator realizes that, on that night, he—as Tyler—must have murdered his boss. Furthermore, the police will suspect “him” of the murder, since he was the last person in the office building on the night of his boss’s murder.

The Narrator realizes that “Tyler” murdered his boss the night the mechanic drove him around. Once again, Tyler represents the Narrator’s “wish fulfillment”—he actually acts on the Narrator’s fantasies and repressed desires. The problem is that now, Tyler’s actions are leading the police back to the Narrator himself.



Instead of getting off the bus at work, the Narrator stays on it. Suddenly, he realizes that everyone on the bus is a member of Project Mayhem—he recognizes the mechanic. The members stand up and grab the Narrator, tying him down. The mechanic reminds the Narrator—whom he calls “Mr. Durden”—that he’s already given instructions to castrate anyone who interferes with Project Mayhem, including himself.

Just as the mechanic is about to pull out his knife, there’s a siren—it’s the cops. The cops climb aboard the bus, and the Narrator realizes the police are members of Project Mayhem, too.

As the members of Project Mayhem crowd over him, the Narrator feels someone cutting away his pants and slipping a rubber band around his testicles. Someone cries, “Don’t hurt him!” The Narrator tries to go to his “happy place” in Ireland, but suddenly, he smells ether and loses consciousness.

The space monkeys are so powerful because they can blend in with ordinary people—because the space monkeys are ordinary people. Here, it seems, the Narrator is about to meet the same fate that Bob met before the novel began: losing his testicles.



The fact that seemingly everyone is a space monkey now adds to the hallucinatory quality of the novel, but also suggests a general malaise of dissatisfaction with modern society, even for those in power (like the police).



In this passage, the Narrator again tries to use repression and “new age” coping techniques to escape from his pain—exactly what Tyler was trying to get him to avoid previously. The punishment of castration for betraying Project Mayhem suggests just how much the fight club’s original “ideals” have been twisted. Now Tyler’s idea of being a “real man” involves mindless devotion to another kind of system.



CHAPTER 27

The Narrator wakes up in the ruins of his old condo. He “checks,” and finds that he still has his testicles. He peers out of the edges of the ruined condo and sees the ground, stories below him. He contemplates jumping, but then remembers Marla, and decides that she’s worth living for—he has to protect her.

The Narrator goes downstairs, and the doorman greets him, calling him, “Sir.” The Narrator calls Marla and tells her to meet him in the place where they first met—he warns her that her life might be in danger. Reluctantly, Marla agrees.

The Narrator survived the last chapter with his testicles intact: it seems that the space monkeys have freed him, though Palahniuk never fully explains why. Possibly, the space monkeys free the Narrator because of their respect for Tyler, who, in their minds, is the same person as the Narrator (that’s why a man shouts, “Don’t hurt him!” at the end of the last chapter). Here, The Narrator contemplates suicide; guilty and afraid of what he’s done as Tyler, he considers killing himself. In doing so, the Narrator would arguably be “sacrificing” himself, as Tyler has been talking about throughout the novel—thus, he would still be doing Tyler’s bidding in a way.



Strangely, the Narrator continues to command the admiration of the space monkeys (even after they turned against him in the last scene). This suggests that the group isn’t as well organized as it might seem—many of its members don’t know that “Tyler” has turned against them.



Shortly afterwards, the Narrator is standing with Marla in the basement of the First Methodist church, where they first ran into each other in the testicular cancer support group. There's another testicular cancer support group going on, but Marla yells at the Narrator, "You killed someone! I called the police." She tells The Narrator that she saw him shoot a man at a hotel. The Narrator is horrified, but tells Marla that it was Tyler who committed such a crime. Marla adds, "And you don't have cancer, either!" Suddenly, everyone in the cancer support group looks at the Narrator, horribly offended.

The style becomes increasingly disjointed as the novel reaches an end. The Narrator's moments of dissociation grow more pronounced—he's still "becoming" Tyler, but now he's conscious of his own divided personality. Evidently, the Narrator (as Tyler) killed a man during his most recent dissociative episode. The passage is darkly hilarious: it's the fact that the Narrator is pretending to have cancer (not the fact that he murdered someone) that turns people's heads, as if lying about your own manner of death is worse than causing actual death.



The Narrator tries to tell Marla the truth: he's afraid Project Mayhem might try to hurt Marla. Marla is suspicious, and asks why the Narrator is telling her this—the Narrator explains, "Because I think I like you." The Narrator leaves the building, thinking, "I have to take care of Tyler Durden."

The Narrator believes that he has to deal with Tyler Durden once and for all, but he doesn't reveal how he intends to do so. The Narrator's impetus for "taking care" of Tyler is his affection for Marla, though he's careful not to use the word "love."



CHAPTER 28

The man whom the Narrator (Tyler) shot at the hotel was named Patrick Madden, and he was a government official, the "special envoy on recycling." He was also, according to the Narrator, an enemy of Project Mayhem. He was compiling a list of possible locations of the fight club—and so Tyler killed him. As the Narrator thinks about Madden, it occurs to him that he imagined Tyler in the first place because he loved Marla, and wanted to woo her.

The Narrator begins to see more and more clearly that Project Mayhem's assassination attempts have become immoral and self-defeating. No good reason for Madden's death is given—apparently, he just stood in Project Mayhem's way in some regard. At the same time that the Narrator begins to see clearly what's wrong with Project Mayhem, he also begins to see clearly why he imagined Tyler in the first place: his affection for Marla.



The Narrator goes to the basement of a local bar, and inside he finds a fight club meeting. Everyone greets him with great respect. He proceeds to fight with many of the members, and bleeds copiously. As he fights, he pictures Patrick Madden's wife kneeling next to her husband's dead body. The Narrator pushes through the pain and continues fighting—"Only in death," he thinks, "are we no longer part of Project Mayhem."

In this passage, the Narrator tries to use pain and violence for different purposes than he has previously. By fighting, the Narrator seems to be punishing himself for Madden's death (and for the emotional pain he's caused to Madden's loved ones, such as his wife). He atones for his crimes by allowing himself to bleed (not that this actually helps Madden's family in any way, however). Death, he now believes, is the only escape from the guilt he feels for leading Project Mayhem as Tyler. His statement also seems to suggest that "Project Mayhem" has grown so large as to encompass life itself—the universe as a whole is violent, meaningless, and cruel.



CHAPTER 29

The Narrator wakes up in Tyler's house—Tyler is standing over him. Tyler tells the Narrator, "The last thing we have to do is your martyrdom thing. Your big death thing." Tyler explains that the Narrator must die—inside a huge skyscraper, which Project Mayhem will blow up.

Tyler wants the Narrator—and therefore himself—to die in a "glorious" explosion. As Tyler explains to the Narrator, he wants "them" to die to set an example for their followers (and, presumably, so the Narrator can't work to undo any of Tyler's work). The word "martyrdom" suggests religious saints who died for their faith, inspiring their followers. But Tyler and the Narrator wouldn't be dying for a god; they'd be dying to celebrate pain and death itself, inspiring the space monkeys to be increasingly violent and dangerous themselves.



Moments later, Tyler and the Narrator are in the top floor of the skyscraper (exactly where they were at the beginning of the novel). The building is primed to blow up in only three minutes.

The novel has finally come full-circle: the flashbacks are over, and we pick up where we started.



The Narrator hears a yell, and suddenly Marla rushes into the room. She's followed by the people from the testicular cancer support group. The Narrator realizes that, from the perspective of the support group, he's just an insane guy pointing a gun into his mouth. They shout, "Stop!" and "Let us help you!" The Narrator yells out that he's killing Tyler, not himself.

Marla has already indirectly saved the Narrator's life once (she inspired him not to kill himself)—now, it seems, she's poised to do the same thing again. The cancer support group (not understanding the Narrator's split personality) mistakenly thinks he's a suicidal cancer patient.



With only one minute to the explosion, Marla shouts, "I think I like you, too." Then she corrects herself, "I like you. I know the difference." The timer goes off, but there's no explosion.

Marla reciprocates the Narrator's feelings—although again, her feelings are "like," not "love," contrary to what Tyler has claimed. "I know the difference" suggests that Marla likes the Narrator—the sane, moral half of "the Narrator"—rather than Tyler—the charismatic but immoral other half.



The Narrator realizes what's happened: previously, Tyler and his team planned to blow up the building using a bomb made from two chemicals, vitro and paraffin. The Narrator knows this, "because Tyler knows this"; he also considers paraffin a risky and less reliable material for bomb making. Because of faulty chemicals, Tyler's plan to blow up the skyscraper has failed. Suddenly, the Narrator decides, "I have to do this," and fires his gun at himself.

Tyler has botched the bombing—because, we're told, Tyler used unreliable chemicals. Previously, the Narrator's psychic connection with Tyler ("I know this because Tyler knows this") has reinforced Tyler's skill and resourcefulness. Here, though, Palahniuk suggests the opposite: the Narrator seems like the resourceful bomb-maker, while Tyler is the clumsy amateur. The Narrator's decision to shoot himself suggests that he's trying to atone for Tyler's crimes, while also preventing Tyler from committing any more crimes. And yet in killing himself, the Narrator is still doing what Tyler envisioned ("your big death thing").



CHAPTER 30

“The Narrator” describes life in Heaven: everything is very white, and there are lots of beautiful angels. God tells the Narrator that each human is a sacred, unique snowflake. The Narrator suddenly says, “Liar.”

“The Narrator” tells the truth: when he shot himself, the bullet tore through his cheek and out of his ear. The Narrator ends up in a mental hospital, and receives letters from Marla all the time. Sometimes, the Narrator gets a visit from hospital nurses or technicians, who say, “We miss you, Mr. Durden.” The visitors assure “Mr. Durden” that everything is going according to plan, and that they “look forward to getting you back.”

At first, we're meant to think that the Narrator has died and gone to Heaven—but because this is a dark Chuck Palahniuk novel, that's a lie. The idea that human beings are beautiful and unique is, ultimately, a fairy tale, at least according to “the Narrator.” The ambiguity of the chapter is whether the narrator is still the Narrator we've come to know, or whether, in trying to kill himself and hitting rock bottom, the Narrator has finally “become” Tyler. “The Narrator’s” rejection of the idea that humans are sacred and unique makes him sound a lot like Tyler.



From the perspective of the space monkeys, the Narrator is Tyler Durden: the charismatic leader who sends them into danger. Based on the fact that the Narrator tried to kill himself (i.e., finally hit “rock bottom”), it's possible that the Narrator has become Tyler; or rather, the Narrator doesn't need an alter ego anymore because he's finally embraced his aggressive masculinity and death drive. Assuming the Narrator gets out of the mental hospital, he seems to have the option of spending more time with Marla (who finally recognizes him as the Narrator, not Tyler) or returning to commanding the space monkeys (who recognize him as Tyler Durden). Because we don't really know what has happened to the Narrator (whether he's attained some kind of enlightenment, whether he's merged with Tyler, whether he's finally killed Tyler), we don't know what he'll do next. In the end, Palahniuk arguably writes himself into a corner, leaving it up to readers to decide whether the Narrator's experiments with pain and violence have left him any wiser or more enlightened—and what the continued existence of Project Mayhem will mean for society at large. Palahniuk also never really expresses how much of Tyler's ideology he himself endorses—he shows it as destructive and self-defeating, and has called the novel a “satire,” but he also portrays Tyler as a charismatic kind of masculine ideal, and still relentlessly mocks consumerist society and the supposed emasculation of modern men.





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