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Bloodlust in Borderlands:
An Examination of Violence in Contemporary American Literature

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Abstract

The Aurora Theater and Newton School shootings of 2012, coupled with a profusion of violent depictions in the United States media, spurred this thesis into creation. The following paper studies the portrayal of violence in contemporary American literature through the analysis of Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* (1985) and Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (1996). A close analysis and comparison of these two novels allows similarities to emerge, notably a tendency to glorify violence and the function of violence as an ideology in both works. These themes create a mirror that reflects contemporary American culture at large, ultimately providing clues to the aspects of American culture that fuel a thirst for violence and incite violent acts.
In the past fifteen years, the United States has witnessed at least 21 mass shootings\(^1\), some of the most destructive of which have been located in Colorado (Citizens Crime Commission). In the summer of 2012, while news of the Aurora movie-theater tragedy spread across the globe, the state of Colorado became infamous for its second mass shooting after James Holmes fired into a crowded theater, leaving 12 dead and 58 injured. The Aurora shooting recalled uncomfortably the Columbine High School shooting of 1999 (Hassan). At Columbine, students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 12 fellow students and murdered 21 others before ultimately taking their own lives (Encyclopedia Britannica). After the initial shock and outrage following these shootings subsided, citizens returned to the question of why: Why do people feel compelled to commit these atrocities? And why does the United States seem to be the site of so many more of these shootings than other developed democracies?

Though sociologists and psychologists have yet to unearth any definitive answers regarding the prevalence of violent crimes in the United States, American literature and art provide some clues as to which particularities of American culture give rise to violent behavior. American literary culture is replete with violence, whether in classic novels like *The Outsiders*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Of Mice and Men* or popular teen novels including *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight*, the latter of which involve torture and civil wars. Tracing continuities in the depictions of violence through literature forms provides insight into the way that Americans perceive and react to violence.

In literature, fiction writers create alternate worlds for their characters to inhabit—worlds that often function similarly to contemporary American society, but which provide arenas where

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\(^1\) The FBI defines a mass shooting as an event where four or more people are killed with the use of a gun containing high-capacity magazine. Information on shooters’ weapons is not always released to the public, so more than 21 mass shootings may have occurred in the past 15 years (Citizens Crime Commission).
violent actions evolve and can be studied unhindered by outside interference. This paper explores two violent American novels: Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* (1985) and Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (1996), which can be loosely classified as popular fiction. In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy explores the actions of the infamous Glanton Gang, a particularly licentious group of scalp-hunters. These men ravage the Texas-Mexico border in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War, which lasted from 1846-8. Volunteers in this war were allowed to serve in small groups with family and friends, and “the democratic nature of the volunteers meant that discipline in this corps was more lax than in the regulars” (“A Call to Arms”). Lack of central command over soldiers in a post-war arena is chaotic, but to further complicate matters, the peace agreement that ended the war was hotly contested and no definitive authority held control over the new American territory. The close-knit nature of the military units coalesced with a fervor for Manifest Destiny and a lack of central authority, resulting in a horrifying post-war world where roving bands of ex-soldiers, marauders, and scalp-hunters warred with formerly peaceful Native American tribes and dispensed justice as they saw fit.

Due to the historical basis for this novel and its intense engagement with questions of morality, much of the academic dialogue surrounding *Blood Meridian* addresses the historical accuracy of the novel (Douglas; Phillips; Shaw) or seeks to untangle the complex philosophical and religious underpinnings of the novel (Curtis; Eddins). This thesis approaches the novel from a wholly different viewpoint, meaning that it shares few commonalities with previous literary discussion about *Blood Meridian*. Though the plotline and the questions that McCarthy raises regarding the place of religion factor into a cohesive understanding of the novel, analysis here will primarily pertain to the role of violence in a lawless setting and the manner in which it affects the characters.
Similar to my analysis of *Blood Meridian*, my discussion of *Fight Club* departs from most existing commentary, which revolves around the concepts of masculinity (Barker; Iocco), the deranged narrator (Bernaerts), and homoeroticism (Brookey). *Fight Club* is set in the present and follows a group of characters that live on the fringes of society, distancing themselves from the institutions and norms of contemporary American civilization in every respect. Exasperated by the hollowness of mass-consumption and the monotony of his office job, the unnamed protagonist unknowingly creates and befriends his own alter-ego, Tyler. Tyler represents everything to which the narrator aspires—he is distant from society, disenchanted with material belongings, and recklessly defiant of authority. The narrator and Tyler are portrayed as separate entities throughout the novel, and only at the end of the narrative does the reader realize that the narrator and Tyler are two personalities that belong to a person with multiple personality disorder. Tyler and the narrator represent interact with each other, hold conversations, and perform separate functions throughout the novel. Much of what the narrator does while Tyler’s personality is in control occurs unbeknownst to the narrator, so for the purpose of clarity in this paper, the two shall be referred to as separate entities, though it is vital to note that they are both separate facets of the same physical person.

Soon after the narrator “meets” and befriends Tyler, the two form an organization known as “fight club.” Fight club is exactly what it claims to be: a club where people go to fight. Since fighting is illegal, fight club is run out of the basements of bars where law enforcement cannot interfere with the workings of the club. The only rules that affect the are “two men per fight, one fight at a time, no shirts no shoes, fights go on as long as they have to” (Palahniuk 50). In the world of *Fight Club*, the real-life consequences of such barbarous fighting are discarded, and the worst injuries involve losing teeth and visits to the hospital for stitches. In an actual fight club,
participants would suffer serious injuries or death on a regular basis. After the publication of Palahniuk’s novel, “fight clubs” cropped up across the globe and in Texas, one unwilling participant ended up in the hospital with a brain hemorrhage and broken vertebrae (USA Today). Fist fights are painful and dangerous, but in *Fight Club*, fights are glorified and violence is portrayed as a force of salvation. The frontier that the narrator and Tyler occupy opens a space where violence acts as a vehicle for escape and salvation. Fighting is portrayed favorably as creating a sense of immediacy, but rarely is violence portrayed as the destructive physical force that it truly is.
Blood Meridian

Threads of modern and ancient philosophy wind through the narrative of Blood Meridian. Coupled with references to the Bible and allusions to other works of literature, the motifs in the novel are complex and require careful untangling. Shane Schimpf, author of The Reader’s Guide to Blood Meridian, formulates a compelling argument for reading the novel through a Nietzschean lens. He argues that the novel’s protagonist, the kid, acts the part of Jesus, and the judge embodies the devil. According to Schimpf, science has historically stood opposed to religion, so the judge plays the role of the devil by attempting to convince the men of Glanton’s crew to subscribe to modern scientific thinking. Furthermore, the novel takes place in a vast, empty desert, making the judge’s attempts to confuse and mislead the kid reminiscent of The Temptation of Christ in the Bible. Throughout the narrative, all churches are described as abandoned and ruinous or as the sites of gruesome slaughters, a repetition which suggests the powerlessness of the Christian God.

There is evidence to support these claims, but the character of the judge ultimately cannot be simplified into the role of the devil, as he appears to care more about himself and the integrity of his philosophical views than converting men to any particular ideology. Schimpf argues that the kid is the only character who shows mercy, but the kid is violent and helps slaughter peaceful Native Americans, which renders his actions too culpable to relegate him to the simple role of Jesus. References to the devil and Jesus run though the descriptions of these characters, and though the characters actions are too erratic to reduce them to these roles, the function of religion in the novel provides an interesting aspect from which to analyze the plotline.
The Anarchy of the Land

The setting of *Blood Meridian* does not determine the disposition of the characters, but an understanding of the world in which the characters live is vital for comprehending their actions. McCarthy launches his readers into a hostile western frontier, forming the bloody backdrop where the novel unfolds. Just as there was no definitive power structure to rule the U.S.’s newly-claimed territories after the Mexican-American War, the world of *Blood Meridian* is anarchic. In this land, there is no army to keep order, no police to enforce laws—which are ignored—and no higher order or meaning to which the men can appeal. The most striking characteristic of McCarthy’s West is that it is a vast nothingness where few creatures can survive. The only humans are roving bands of warriors, bent on eradicating one another, and the desert teems with the violence of their constant warfare. This depiction evokes the Biblical description of the hell, where sinners “shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thessalonians 1:9, *The Holy Bible*). Glanton’s Gang is truly in a place cast off from all civilization, where the only certainties are continued fighting, destruction, and an eventual death by violence.

McCarthy’s West may not be a literal hell, but constant comparisons to alternate realms evokes a sense of other-worldliness about the setting. The desert is depicted as different sort of reality than modern civilized society, as a place where the laws of the civilized world no longer apply. As the kid enters the milieu of the desert, he and the company spend nights with “their hearts beating in the sand like pilgrims exhausted upon the face of the planet Anareta” (McCarthy 48). The comparison to a foreign planet invites the reader to view this land as other-worldly, but further description enforces the desert’s resemblances to the Christian hell. During electrical storms, the company rides through a region where “strange shapes of soft blue fire

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2 The destroying planet.
[run] over the metal of the horses’ trappings and the wagonwheels [roll] in hoops of fire” (McCarthy 49). The repetition of fire imagery calls to mind the eternal fires of the underworld, and the men rode “like a patrol condemned to ride out some ancient curse. A thing surmised from the blackness by the creak of leather and the chink of metal” (McCarthy 157). An ancient curse parallels the concept of hell in the eternal, inhuman, and endless suffering involved. Furthermore, the land is “like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear” (McCarthy 49). It is commonly held in contemporary planet geology that when Earth was formed, the surface was molten and eventually cooled to become rock and soil. In McCarthy’s alternate order, danger is pervasive to the extent that the men’s reality is constituted of fear. Fear, not tangible objects like rocks and sand, comprise the landscape, and fear is as common and omni-present as the physical elements that constitute Earth.

This world may be built from fear, but “death seemed the most prevalent feature of the landscape” (McCarthy 50). In this barren land, McCarthy emphasizes the role of Death, who pursued them “unseen and his lean horse and his lean cart [left] no track upon such ground or any ground. . . . He’s a wry and grinning tradesman good to follow every campaign or hound men from their holes in just those whited regions where they’ve gone to hide from God” (McCarthy 50). Not only does this further the futility in appealing to God, but in the Bible, Death is also personified as one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, harbinger of the ultimate judgment of mankind. Through the description of the men’s intangible location, McCarthy invites his audience to abandon the conception that his characters’ world exists in the same realm as the reader’s physical world. If any powers do exist in McCarthy’s land, they are overwhelmingly the power of evil and the lure of violence.
In the desert, the only people that the company encounters are Native American or Mexican war parties. The first group that they come across is a band stocktheives “with daubings like a company of mountain clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning” (McCarthy 55). A “hell more horrible” than the popularly-depicted Christian hell invokes an unfamiliar and horrendous world, one which teeters on the brink between reality and fantasy. McCarthy conflates this depiction of an alternate realm with the concept of madness when he writes that the thieves are “screeching and yammering and clothed in smoke like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools” (McCarthy 55). This nightmarish imagery suggests that the characters are trapped in a realm where surreality borders insanity. Whether the kid’s world is ruled by laws so foreign that they are almost past comprehension, or whether the world only appears foreign because the desert has driven the men to partial insanity, is ultimately irrelevant. The emphasis here lies upon the violent nature of the men who traverse this desert.

The stocktheives that the men encounter and later war parties appear terrifying until the description of Glanton’s Gang is revisited. McCarthy introduces Glanton and his men as:

“A pack of viciouslooking humans mounted on unshod indian ponies riding half drunk through the streets, bearded, barbarous, clad in the skins of animals stitched up with thews and armed with weapons of every description . . . and the trappings of their horses fashioned out of human skin and their bridles woven up from human hair and decorated with human teeth and the riders wearing scapulars or necklaces of dried and blackened human ears . . reeling in the saddle, dangerous, filthy, brutal, the whole like a visitation from some heathen land where they and others like them fed on human flesh” (McCarthy 82-3).

Ironically, Glanton’s men are portrayed as heathen, though they justify their scalping exploits as the triumph of the white man over the uncivilized, “heathen” Native Americans. In a sick,
“Silence of the Lambs”-esque way, the men have chosen to dress their horses in the skins of their victims and wear dried body-parts as decoration, something that not even the “heathen” Native Americans would deem appropriate. Not only do Glanton’s men partake in violent acts, but they revel in the memories of their past exploits. The ubiquitous violence of the desert pervades even the men’s clothing and demeanor, suggesting that violence is integral to the men’s existence.

The characters spend the majority of their time in the midst of the desert, but they occasionally return to cities to receive compensation for the scalps that they have collected or to procure new contracts. Brief as these interactions with civilization are, McCarthy displays that the control that officials hold over their towns is tentative at best, and that power belongs to whomever is strong enough to take it by force. When the scalp-hunters return to Chihuahua after a long campaign, the governor of the city prepares a lavish feast in their honor (McCarthy 176). Despite the wealth of extravagant foods assembled for the banquet, the hunger of Glanton’s crew proves to be insatiable, and couriers are sent forth from the mansion to scavenge more food from stores in the town. The men’s hunger extends to gold, women, and liquor, so after the dinner, “pistolfire soon [becomes] general and . . . fights [break] out” (McCarthy 176). In the aftermath of the feast, the men demonstrate their inability to temporarily abandon the violent behavior that consumes their existence. The servants, band members, and the governor himself slip away while “furniture was disassembled” and “a bonfire that had consumed a good part of the hotel’s furnishings smoldered in the street before the door. . . . This scene and scenes like them were repeated night after night” (McCarthy 176).

More disturbing than the barbaric nature of the men and the utter destruction that they cause is the refusal of the governor to intervene with their vicious behavior. Despite appeals from his citizenry, the governor claims he is “much like the sorcerer’s apprentice who could indeed
provoke the imp to do his will but could in no way make him cease again” (McCarty 176). Law-enforcing institutions in Chihuahua are clearly weak, as the governor does not appear to have troops at his disposal to drive out the scalp-hunters, even as their gold begins to dwindle and they resort to outright robbing stores for wares. The governor accepts these acts as inevitable and citizens are forced to stay locked indoors for their own safety, returning to their normal lives only after the scalp-hunters have departed. Laws clearly do not apply to Glanton’s men; rather, they subscribe to the idea that those who can exercise the most violence possess the most power, and they abuse this power to the greatest extent possible.

Finding the laws of men lacking in this land, some might turn to the higher order in the laws of God, but McCarthy makes clear from the outset that the world of Blood Meridian is a world where God is either impartial or does not exist. The first person to offer the kid work as a scalp-hunter states that “there is no God in Mexico. Never will be” (McCarty 36). Everything pertaining to the Christian God resonates of death, notably in depictions of the churches throughout the novel. Before joining Glanton’s gang, the kid awakes “in the nave of a ruinous church,” the floor of which “was deep in dried guano and the droppings of cattle and sheep” (McCarty 27). In a back room, there are several dead bodies and outside the church, “a carved stone Virgin held in her arms a headless child” (McCarty 28). The headless body of Jesus alludes not only to the death of the Holy Trinity, but also the death of Christian beliefs. A short time later, as the kid is fleeing from a war party, he takes cover in a church where “the stone floor was heaped with the scalped and naked and partly eaten bodies of some forty souls who’d barricaded themselves in this house of God against the heathen” (McCarty 63). The victims had fled to the church in hope of finding sanctuary, but “the savages had hacked holes and shot them down from above,” and now “the murdered lay in a great pool of their communal blood”
McCarthy’s emphasis of “communal blood” suggests ties to the Christian ritual of the Eucharist, wherein participants consume “the body and blood of Christ” in order to strengthen their bond with Jesus. At the Last Supper, Jesus proclaims, “Whoso eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood hath eternal life, and I will raise him up at the Last Day.” (John 6:53–58, The Holy Bible). Since the people who constitute this communal blood are dead, Jesus and God himself are dead through association, and their bonds with the dead in the church are formed through the violent nature of their demises.

On the houses surrounding the ruined church, carrion birds perch “with their wings outstretched in attitudes of exhortation like dark little bishops” (McCarthy 62). In many sects of Christianity, bishops are in charge of overseeing a portion of the church and are perceived as successors to the Twelve Apostles, who spread Christianity (Van Hove). If birds that feed off of the dead are the overseers of Christianity in this world, this necessitates the demise of their constituents and the death of the very ideology that they supervise. McCarthy emphasizes the death of religion and the widespread skepticism of the power of God upon the kid’s arrival in the West. The Kid jumps ship and reaches Nacogdoches in the midst of a torrential downpour, where he steps into a mass where “the Reverend Green had been playing to a full house as long as the rain had been falling and the rain had been falling for two weeks” (McCarthy 6). The tent where the Reverend Green gives his sermons is so full that there is only “standing room along the back walls, a place or two” (McCarthy 7). Reverend Green’s message is popular and worshippers flock to his sermons, yet the residents of Nacogdoches are quick to turn against him at the first question of his legitimacy. In the midst of the Reverend’s animated sermon on the prevalence of temptation in Nacogdoches, the judge enters the tent and proclaims that the Reverend Green “holds no papers of divinity from any institution recognized or improvised” and claims that the
Reverend “has only committed to memory a few passages from the good book for the purpose of lending to his fraudulent sermons some faint flavor of the piety he despises” (McCarthy 7). At this point, the Reverend begins furiously reading from the Bible to discredit the judge’s claims. He sobbingly decries, “This is him. The devil. Here he stands,” yet no one, not even the reader, believes him in this early stage of the novel. The judge goes on to state that the Reverend raped a child and a goat in Fort Smith, a statement which causes a gunfight breaks out, ultimately killing the Reverend and a large portion of the people in the tent. The judge never claims to hold authority on the matter of the Reverend’s culpability or represent any legal institutions, yet the participants of Reverend Green’s tent revival more readily accept the judge’s accusations than the Reverend’s powerful refutations, such as his obvious ability to read. The judge later reveals that he has never even visited Fort Smith, reinforcing the trivial nature of the citizens and their willingness to abandon their beliefs without evidence.

Clergy turn from religion in the same manner as the citizens, notably the expriest Tobin, who is one of the members of Glanton’s Gang. The judge enjoys taunting the expriest and during one of his speeches on war, notes that “the priest has put by the robes of his craft and taken up the tools of that higher calling which all men honor. The priest also would be no godserver but a god himself” (McCarthy 262). Here, violence once again stands as the lone ideology that can provide meaning in a land where religion has failed, and violence alone can provide a sense of immediacy in a world ruled by warfare. According to Schimpf, “in a world without justice or teleology, war flourishes. It does so by virtue of its ability to give life meaning and immediacy…. The judge worships war because it alone can make man noble” (Schimpf 5). War creates the illusion that men can take control of their lives through violence, as their actions and reactions directly determine whether they will live or die. Just as a thrilling roller coaster ride or
a near-death experience evokes sentiments of mortality, living in close proximity to death allows the men to experience the constant thrill of danger. When the expriest states that he will not rise to the judge’s bait and that the judge should not ask it of him, the judge responds, “Ah priest. . . . What could I ask of you that you have not already given?” The priest, to the judge’s delight, has fully abandoned his order and devoted himself to the calling of war, solidifying the judge’s perceived superiority over the dead Christian faith.

Since religion and church officials hold little influence in these western towns, perhaps science, which has historically stood opposed to religion, holds sway. This is the basis of Schimpf’s reading of Blood Meridian, and using Nietzsche’s The Antichrist, he argues that “science undermines the very underpinnings of religion” (Schimpf 24). With science, man “no longer needs religion to answer all of life’s riddles” (Schimpf 24). It follows that in his antagonistic role, the judge promotes a scientific view of the world. Though the men’s refusal to subscribe to religion should make this type of ideology attractive, the characters in the novel ultimately find science as an ideology as hollow and incomprehensible as Christianity. Part of this can be attributed to the treacherous nature of the judge. All of the characters claim to have met the judge before joining Glanton’s Gang, but Glanton himself comes across the judge as he and his men are fleeing from a band of Apaches. The judge is without water or food, hundreds of miles from civilization, “set on a rock in the middle of the greatest desert you’d ever want to see. Just perched on this rock like a man waiting for a coach” (McCarthy 131). The eeriness of this scene eliminates the question of chance, and it is clear that the judge was waiting specifically for Glanton and his men. The judge’s apparition once again parallels The Temptation of Christ, where Jesus comes across the devil alone in the desert and the devil attempts to lead him astray. Unlike Jesus’s refusal of the devil, Glanton does not refuse the judge. The expriest Tobin claims
that Glanton and the judge form “a secret commerce. Some terrible covenant,” and within hours they were “conversin like brothers” (McCarthy 132). At first, Glanton and the judge jointly lead the group, though eventually the judge establishes himself as the sole leader. Glanton and the judge’s “terrible covenant” is never explicitly revealed, but the judge’s similarities to the devil and his status as the leader of the crew certainly serve to condemn the countless slaughters which he prompts the men to commit.

The judge’s design after his unexpected apparition is unveiled when he uses his mastery of science to create gunpowder from bat guano, sulphurous rock, and urine from the men. Although the gunpowder allows the men to fight the Apaches, this command of science merely deepens their mistrust of the judge. Throughout the novel, the judge gives grand speeches, expounding upon the merits of scientific thinking and testing the values of his companions. He claims that “the man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear,” but “that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world” (McCarthy 207-8). Despite these assertions, the men are unlearned and frequently unable to follow the judge’s train of thought. Even in the face of certain death, the judge is unable to abandon his games with the men. After a battle, as the men flee across the middle of the desert with no water, no provisions, and little ammunition, the judge attempts to buy a hat from one of the few remaining men. Chances of survival are slim, and knowing this, the man initially states that his hat is not for sale, as he will doubtlessly need it to protect himself from the sun and survive. The judge responds, “Everything’s for sale,” and manages to eventually purchase the hat for one hundred dollars (McCarthy 295). The man’s values are capricious and he sells his hat on the assumption that he will survive and later spend his hundred dollars—a deluded notion, as he dies a short time later.
Despite a lack of strong values or ideologies in this land, the judge’s attempts to convert the men to scientific thought are ultimately futile and the men continue to solely respect the merits of violence.
Violence in the Characters

As discussed, McCarthy renders the plot of Blood Meridian in a Nietzschean world void of law, order, and God. Throughout the novel, the only constant is violence: after the bloodshed in which the men participate and the atrocities that they witness, violence becomes the lens through which they can order their world. Violence solidifies the characters’ distance from civilized society, but also acts as a force of redemption. In this context, violence transcends its typical function as pure destruction—for the members of Glanton’s Gang, violence takes on the characteristics of a consummate ideology, offering them a crooked path to salvation and ultimately the misguided illusion of self-worth.

McCarthy acknowledges the inherent violence in mankind on the first page of the novel, which commences with a description of the kid (here “the child”) and his upbringing in Tennessee. His father, a former schoolmaster, does not teach or care for his son. The child “can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence. All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man” (McCarthy 3). By emphasizing the child’s “taste for mindless violence,” McCarthy is establishing that the violence that the kid will later exhibit in his campaigns with Glanton is already present in the child. His first implication is that the child’s lack of education has reduced him to a more primal version of man, or that his illiterateness and lack of distractions or play has allowed him to naturally develop an affinity for violence. “All history is present in that visage” alludes to a much broader truth—here, McCarthy is stating that this undercurrent of violence is inherent in all of mankind, but that society has managed to suppress it. The kid is neglected and is not normalized into society, which allows this violent nature to emerge.
The child runs away at the age of fourteen and has reached St. Louis by the time he is fifteen, where “he lives in a room above a courtyard behind a tavern and he comes down at night like some fairybook beast to fight with the sailors” (McCarthy 4). At this tender age, the child indiscriminately fights with an array of weapons and shows equal indiscrimination in the age, size, or ethnicity of the men that he fights. He fights “men from lands so far and queer that standing over them where they lie bleeding in the mud he feels mankind itself vindicated” (McCarthy 4). Rather than vindication through penitence or good deeds, fighting and bloodshed are salvation for the child. Violence acts as a universal constant, something that all men can understand regardless of the language they speak or the land from which they hail.

The judge also notes the significance in violence’s universal nature. He describes the relationship between man and war, saying, “War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way” (McCarthy 259). War is inevitable and has always existed, but the advent of mankind allowed war to reach its full potential. No other living being could engage in warfare with the mastery that mankind displays, nor could animals commit the cruel acts of war in which the judge delights. This mastery of warfare parallels an inherent evil in mankind that a hermit observes in the beginning of the novel. While speaking to the kid, he states that “you can find meanness in the least of creatures, but when God made man the devil was at his elbow. A creature that can do anything. Make a machine. And a machine to make the machine. An evil than can run itself a thousand years, no need to tend it” (McCarthy 20). This perpetuation of evil, particularly as machinery, is the same as the perpetuation of violence and warfare. Scientific innovations have historically emerged through the needs of more accurate or destructive weaponry in warfare. The hermit’s argument for an endless regeneration of evil,
independent of mankind, is related to the tie between science and warfare. Mankind alone has perfected warfare, just as mankind alone has perfected the machine and “machines to make the machine.” Man’s relationship with machines and warfare stems from the innate evil in mankind, an evil which cannot be found in any other living creature and which contributes directly to mankind’s affinity for violence.

The first true action scene of the novel displays the kid’s comfort with acts of physical violence and plays out like a scene from a modern action film. Before the kid joins up with the scalphunters, he makes his way to Bexam. He is entirely destitute and offers to sweep a bar in exchange for a drink, a proposition to which the barman seemingly agrees. When the kid finishes sweeping, the barman refuses to serve him. The kid, angry and humiliated, grabs the barman’s pistol and two bottles of alcohol and the scene unfolds when

“The kid crouched lightly with the bottles and feinted and then broke the right one over the man’s head. Blood and liquor sprayed and the man’s knees buckled and his eyes rolled. The kid had already let go the bottleneck and he pitched the second bottle into his right hand in a roadagent’s pass before it even reached the floor and he backhanded the second bottle across the barman’s skull and crammed the jagged remnant into his eye as he went down” (McCarthy 27).

The prose in this passage is charged with excitement, and despite the lack of punctuation and the fast pace of the excerpt, the scene seems to unfold in slow motion. The kid’s reflexes are flawless, almost super-human, and the grace with which he kills the barman is elevated to the status of a form of art. Glorification of this act, which is actually the brutal and unsubstantiated murder of an innocent though impertinent barman, mirrors the glorification of violence in almost every Hollywood action movie. Though later, similarly-dected scenes evoke the sentiment of revulsion more than admiration, McCarthy’s description here allows the reader, for a brief moment, to feel the same lure toward violence as the kid.
At a camp one night, after the kid has survived several campaigns, the judge makes a speech that provides the most succinct view of the relationship between man and violence found within the narrative. He states:

“Suppose two men at cards with nothing to wager save their lives. . . . A turn of the card. The whole universe for such a player has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if he is to die at that man’s hand or that man at his. What more certain validation of a man’s worth could there be? This enhancement of the game to its ultimate state admits no argument concerning the notion of fate. . . . This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one’s will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god” (McCarthy 260-1).

The judge’s argument at once appears full of exceptions and omissions. The judge fails to take into account technological advances that create uneven instances of warfare, such as Apaches fighting with bows and arrows against the dragoon pistols and rifles of the scalp-hunters. Despite this flaw in logic, the judge’s view demonstrates that violence is a useful tool for determining worth because it is the simplest way of pitting two men against each other “within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select” (McCarthy 261). The judge is also arguing that individual actions and beliefs are meaningless. He uses the example of a disagreement culminating in a duel, contending that “the argument is indeed trivial, but not so the separate wills thereby made manifest. Man’s vanity may well approach the infinite in capacity, but his knowledge remains imperfect and howevemuch he comes to value his judgments ultimately he must submit them before a higher court” (McCarthy 261). According to the judge, the only way to ascertain a man’s worth with any certainty is through combat. Violence takes on a new role in this setting and becomes a mechanism that allows for the
measuring of worth. Instead of a means to an end, violence in conflict becomes an end in itself as continued survival is a continued validation of worthiness to survive.

Acts of collective violence add another dimension to the role of violence in the novel. In some of the most intense passages of the novel, characters tend to operate as a single entity and savagery is the force that unites them. In these moments, McCarthy continually compares the men to animals, or notes that they display animal-like tendencies. The nature of this collective is demonstrated as the men are pursued by Apaches after a battle. While they attempted to outrun the Apaches, “each man scanned the terrain and the movements of the least of creatures were logged into their collective cognizance until they were federated with invisible wires of vigilance and advanced upon that landscape with a single resonance” (McCarthy 236). Typically prey, not predators, behave in this manner, as with gazelles intent upon detecting the presence of a lion as they drink at a watering hole. Though this inversion of the men’s role reverses their typical relationship with violence, violence remains the cause of their change in behavior. As they camped at night, “the company sat among the rocks without fire or bread or camaraderie any more than banded apes. They crouched in silence eating raw meat” (McCarthy 154). The danger of the landscape and the men’s desperate attempts to avoid detection has reduced them to little more than animals, concerned primarily with survival and capable of merely responding to changes in their environment within the context of continuing their existence. As the company fled to safety, “they buried their stool like cats and they barely spoke at all” (McCarthy 157). Again, the comparison to cats emphasizes the basic, animalistic nature of their actions. Faced with the prospect of a brutal death,
“They rode like men invested with a purpose whose origins were antecedent to them, like blood legatees of an order both imperative and remote. For although each man among them was discrete unto himself, conjoined they made a thing that had not been before and in that communal soul were wastes hardly reckonable more than those whited regions on old maps where monsters do live and there is nothing other of the known world save conjectural winds” (McCarthy 158).

McCarthy introduces this passage while the men are at risk of becoming victims of violence, yet their collective nature can be just as readily applied to their raids. During murder scenes, the crew customarily lacks individualized descriptions, obscuring which man committed which violent act. Instead, the men constitute one cohesive, violent unit, and since their acts of violence are similar, distinction between individuals becomes unnecessary. Despite this collective nature, the entity that the men form is unique and has never “been before,” perhaps because the souls of the men are corrupt beyond anything that has ever existed, and conjectures of the darkness that lies therein is “hardly reckonable,” like the mythical spaces where “monsters do live.”

This collective violence is displayed as the gang massacres a village, when “men were wading about in the red waters hacking aimlessly at the dead and some lay coupled to the bludgeoned bodies of young women dead or dying on the beach” (McCarthy 163). McCarthy refuses to distinguish between any of the characters, suggesting that no men are more or less moral than others and that each is equally capable of raping dead or dying women. In fact, this passage constitutes one of the few moments in the book where McCarthy makes mention of women at all, as there is a conspicuous lack of female characters in Blood Meridian. Throughout the narrative, women are defined as objects of violence, never as perpetrators of violence—a concept which is present in modern American society, though to a lesser extent. At Yuma, “a young Mexican girl was crouched naked under the shade of the wall . . . covering her breasts with her hands. She wore a rawhide collar about her neck and she was chained to a post and there
was a clay bowl of blackened meatscraps beside her” (McCarthy 284). This girl has been reduced to the position of a dog and is likely kept as a sex slave, as a servant would not be chained in such a manner. Feminine women who fill typical gender roles, such as mothers or helpless young girls, are raped or murdered throughout the novel, and the only sex scenes are rape scenes, repulsive for the uninhibited violence involved. After the feast at Chihuahua, the governor arranges a dance and upon entering the dancehall, “the scalphunters stood grinning at the dames, sucking their teeth, armed with knives and pistols and mad about the eyes” (McCarthy 177). Later in the passage, it is revealed that these women are actually whores and once again, common objects of violence. When the men take over the operation of a ferry, “horses were taken and women violated and bodies began to drift past the Yuma camp downriver” (McCarthy 273). Women are helpless victims in this depiction, unable to defend themselves from the atrocious behavior of Glanton’s Gang or any of the dangers of the West. Though the West is a perilous place, women in the novel are wholly dependent upon the protection of men and all in all depictions women, save those involving solely the kid, the men use force as their primary means of interaction.

The narrative mentions other women, but these women are not objects of lust and are cheated or murdered by the men instead of raped. Before the kid makes his way to Nacogdoches, he gets shot in a bar fight and is cared for by “a hardlooking woman with a wiry body like a man’s. By the time he is mended he has no money to pay her and he leaves in the night” (McCarthy 4). Perhaps due to the ease of eluding this woman, the kid treats her as he would a man, escaping quietly in the night instead of resorting to violence to settle the matter. Later, after a raid, the men ride through a village and find an old woman who escaped from a “meatcamp”³

³ A primitive packing house where buffalo were dressed after mass slaughters—this passage infers that this woman held there by force and treated similarly to a slave.
and can’t walk. For apparently no reason, he dismounted, “put the pistol to her head and fired….
A fistsized hole erupted out of the far side of the woman’s head in a great vomit of gore” (McCarthy 103-4). Glanton promptly scalps the woman, displaying his utter lack of respect for a woman who has only recently escaped horrible, abusive conditions and reinforcing the impression that women are the constant recipients of systematic, violent behavior.

In one instance, as Glanton stares off into the distance, McCarthy reveals that “four hundred miles to the east were the wife and child that he would not see again” (McCarthy 179). After the heartless slaughters that Glanton has arranged, the thought of him functioning in a domestic setting with a wife and kid is incomprehensible. As displayed in Chihuahua, none of the members of Glanton’s crew would be able to survive in a civilized area, enforcing the notion that a code other than law must be followed to ensure survival in the West. The men’s treatment of women is entirely irreconcilable with the relative equality of women in contemporary American society and suggests that, crude as their behavior is, this type of violence can only be perpetrated in areas separate from societal norms and laws.

Despite these horrific depictions, the one instance of genuine kindness in the novel is directed toward a woman. The kid parts with the remainder of Glanton’s men at the age of sixteen and is arrested shortly thereafter. While in jail, “he began to speak with a strange urgency of things few men have seen in a lifetime and his jailers said that his mind had come uncottered by the acts of blood in which he had participated” (McCarthy 317). The jailers’ theory is supported by the change in the kid’s actions—throughout the novel he remains silent, and only toward the end does he begin speaking to people or relating his tale. He also seeks honest employment as a guide for companies crossing the desert or as a hired hand on ships. On the kid’s final journey, he sets out through the desert as a guide and finds an old woman taking
shelter between some rocks. He approaches her, tells her part of his story, and offers to convey her to somewhere safe, but she does not respond. This marks an immense shift in the kid’s demeanor, as it constitutes the first instance in the novel where a character has displayed genuine kindness to someone, but this compassion is ultimately in vain. Eventually, the kid “touched her arm. She moved slightly, her whole body, light and rigid. She weighed nothing. She was just a dried shell and she had been dead in that place for years” (McCarthy 328). The futility of this act renders it somewhat hollow, and unfortunately, the shift in the kid’s attitude corresponds with his mental decline and renders him too weak to survive in such a hostile setting.

At the end of the narrative, the kid encounters the judge at a bar, where the judge states that he and the kid are “the last of the true” (McCarthy, 340). The judge then picks a random man at the bar and informs the kid that the man’s main complaint with life is likely that “men will not do as he wishes them to. Have never done, will never do. That’s the way of things with him and his life is so balked about by difficulty and become so altered of its intended architecture that he is little more than a walking hovel hardly fit to house a human spirit at all” (McCarthy, 343). Here, the judge is alluding to the difference between the kid and the other men in the bar. The kid and the judge share the same violent past, and the judge argues that violence has shaped them. The judge goes on to say that a true man is one “who has offered himself up entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen the horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart” (McCarthy 345). This scene, the last in the novel involving the kid, mirrors McCarthy’s introduction of the kid and his father. In both scenes, McCarthy argues that the true nature of man is violent and base, and that the most genuine characters are those who fully accept the violence within them. People who ignore that violence, such as the man at the bar, allow their lives to be dictated by the architecture of society.
These people never question their route, but their lives are always more difficult because they are constantly restricted by morals and laws. The kid, on the other hand, allowed violence to consume him during the Glanton’s campaigns, which allowed him to escape societal confines and determine the path of life.

Though violence is present in most every scene of Blood Meridian, the manner in which McCarthy ends the novel displays that the type of violence depicted throughout the narrative is unsustainable. The epilogue is a vignette that follows “a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground” (McCarthy 351). The man is building a fence, but McCarthy inverts the structure of the sentence to display that the man is actually progressing through the construction of the fence. This fence signals the closing of the West and the establishment of civilization, law, and order. Each movement of the man is halting and “monitored with escapement and pallet,” a description which acts as a metaphor for clocks and displays the forward march of progress. The progress that the man makes across the plain “seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle,” which implies that the men choose progress consciously over alternate options, but rather continue to pursue progress as though testing a scientific theory (McCarthy 351). The inevitable and unaltering continuation of progress eradicates the place of violence in the West, as the destruction inherent in violence stands opposed to humanity’s attempts to advance.
Fight Club and Society

*Fight Club* features brutally violent acts perpetuated by emotionally broken protagonists and depicts the type of lifestyle that can only evolve after a person removes themself from the societal grid. The narrator and Tyler squat in a run-down house on the outskirts of town, which is nestled between an abandoned machine shop and block-long warehouse. For most of the novel, they work outside of the law, either by openly flouting authority or by convincing the police force to join their ranks. This distance from society opens a realm where violence and violent acts can perpetuate while harming virtually no one. Throughout the novel, there is a conspicuous lack of victims for each act of violence, and whatever physical harm a character experiences through participation in violence is compensated tenfold by the supposed enlightenment or knowledge that the character gains.

According to the narrator, mainstream society forms a trap that consumes Americans, who eventually lose their individual identity in a deluge of Ikea furniture and “hand-blown green glass dishes with the tiny bubbles and imperfections, little bits of sand, proof that they were crafted by the honest, simple, hard-working aboriginal peoples of wherever” (Palahniuk 41). Unique, hand-blown dishes, riddled with the imperfections inherent in manmade objects, are an example of the need to differentiate oneself with physical possessions instead of the strengths and flaws that make each person’s character unique. In the first few pages of the novel, the narrator “frees” himself from his former life and all of his earthly belongings by blowing up his own apartment and all of the furniture that he has spent years collecting. This is chronologically the first act of violence in the plot and allows the narrator to escape to the edge of society, move into the house on Paper Street with Tyler, and form fight club. Though he does destroy his physical possessions, there is a distinction between destroying a physical object and destroying the desire for objects, the latter being a process that spans several weeks for the narrator.
Nonetheless, violence functions as something akin to religion and “saves” the narrator from the tedium of his home life. For the characters in the novel, life is full of abstract concepts governed by American mass-consumption. The appeal of self-destruction through fighting is that it loans life a sense of immediacy and allows characters to feel alive in a way that they usually cannot.

Escape is one of the primary themes in *Fight Club*, and Palahniuk pins the structure of contemporary American society as the culprit that spurs the narrator’s desperate attempts to distance himself from his current life. Violence is inextricably wound into the plot of the novel and the narrator frequently cites violence as a means of attaining freedom or escape. As the narrator begins reliving his tale, he describes his life before he met Tyler Durden and invented fight club. He shares his take on mass consumption in America, stating, “You buy the sofa. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. . . . Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug. Then you’re trapped in your lovely little nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you” (Palahniuk 44). The process of purchasing furniture becomes a means of self-fulfillment, and instead of individuals defining themselves by who they are, they define themselves by what they own. When the narrator echoes Gandhi and says “the things you used to own, now they own you,” he is referring to the disproportionate sense of attachment and protection that people develop for mere objects. In this example, different furniture collections and physical possessions at large are depicted as the means of differentiating between people, instead of differentiation based upon a person’s character or less tangible personality traits.

A sense of removal perpetuates the narrator’s daily life, and despite his constant, close proximity to tragedy, human suffering is incapable of spurring him to any kind of emotional response. The narrator holds a monotonous office job as a recall campaign coordinator for a multinational car corporation, which produces cars that regularly malfunction and result in fatal
accidents (Palahniuk 30). The narrator’s job is to determine whether the average likelihood of a malfunction multiplied by the estimated number of out-of-court settlements is less than or greater than the cost of recalling an entire line of vehicles. Though the bulk of this job involves applying simple mathematical formulas, the narrator is required to fly around the country, inspecting the ruined cars. Human remains are frequently burned into the upholstery and the narrator has “seen people’s legs cut off at the knee when turbochargers start exploding and send their vanes through the firewall and into the passenger compartment” (Palahniuk 99). The burned-out vehicles that the narrator inspects place him adjacent to scenes of grizzly violence, but because he is not involved in the crashes until the investigations, there is still a level of removal between himself and the violence that he witnesses. The narrator is fascinated by the carnage that occurs in the car crashes, yet his life is removed from violence to the extent that he feels compelled to seek it out.

Even outside of the office, a sense of ennui permeates the narrator’s life. He has been suffering from insomnia for two years and explains that “everything becomes an out-of-body experience,” that “everything is so far away, a copy of a copy of a copy” (Palahniuk 19, 21). The effects of insomnia are exacerbated by the monotony of the narrator’s life, and repetition is enhanced through the endless plane flights and hotel rooms inherent in the narrator’s profession. He complains to his doctor that he is in pain, but his doctor responds that if he wants to see real pain, he should go to the support groups for people with brain parasites. In his quest to bridge the separation that he feels from his life, this is exactly what the narrator does. Though he is still removed from the groups in that he is not fatally ill, participation helps the narrator sleep. Visiting these support groups puts the narrator in close proximity to the terminally ill, enhancing the narrator’s sense of immediacy to death.
The narrator explains that before fight club, everything in his life “just seemed too complete, and maybe we have to break everything to make something better out of ourselves” (Palahniuk 52). Instead of choosing simply opt out of consumerism and office jobs, the narrator decides that self-destruction was the answer. Ultimately, the narrator concludes that he will break his “attachment to physical power and possessions . . . because only through destroying [himself] can [he] discover the greater power of [his] spirit” (Palahniuk 49). Violence through self-destruction operates as a means of enlightenment throughout the novel, and the narrator constantly makes references to the Buddhist-type enlightenment that he has reached through fight club. In all situations where he is under great duress, the narrator describes himself as a “Buddhist cow,” which is ironic as Buddhists are extremely non-violent, yet the narrator claims to have attained a similar calm state through his participation in fight club. Essentially, the narrator has reached the same state of spiritual enlightenment as a Buddhist, but this transformation has occurred through violence rather than meditation and self-reflection. While riding in a car driven by other fight club members, the narrator states that “even after a week of fight club, you have no trouble driving inside the speed limit” (Palahniuk 139). Other drivers react stereotypically and “cars tailgate. You get the finger from other drives. Total strangers hate you. It’s absolutely nothing personal. After fight club, you’re so relaxed, you just cannot care” (Palahniuk 139). Few American drivers drive within the speed limit if they have the option to speed, which creates a powerful juxtaposition between the type of aggression that fighters exhibit in fight club and their calm obedience of seemingly trivial laws, namely speed limits. By releasing their aggressions in fight club, the members are able to approach their everyday lives in a more relaxed, detached manner, effectively avoiding the small frustrations and worries that plague most Americans.
Fight club forms a microcosm founded on violence where men can escape from society, laws, and the pressures of their lives. In battering their bodies, the men are seeking to liberate their souls, but “who guys are in fight club is not who they are in the real world” (Palahniuk 49). The sense of liberation that the men experience is temporary and does not extend beyond the realm of fight club. Society either represses people by ingraining them with the values of a culture founded on mass-consumption, or conditions them until they can no longer display individual characteristics. This makes fight club the one place where men can rediscover their identities, all through acts of violence. The narrator goes on to add that “you aren’t alive anywhere like you’re alive at fight club” and after spending Saturday night fighting, “when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved” (Palahniuk 51). Fight club’s comparison to a religious experience further emphasizes the idea of violence as a vehicle for enlightenment and salvation. Despite the pacifying effects of fight club, it is still only a temporary escape for participants. Fight club does not actually change any of the situations that spur the men to vent their aggressions through fighting in the first place. The narrator observes that “most guys are at fight club because of something they’re too scared to fight. After a few fights, you’re afraid a lot less” (Palahniuk 54). Fight club does not rectify the men’s dissatisfaction with their jobs or loveless marriages, or the hollowness that they feel as a result of America’s culture of mass-consumption. Fight club offers respite, but only within the realm of fight club—it does nothing to resolve the underlying issues that drive men there in the first place.

As time goes on, Tyler decides that the small act of rebellion that fight club comprises is insufficient and introduces the narrator to the art of soap-making. Making soap initially appears relatively tame compared to fighting, until Tyler reveals that he makes his soap using human fat, which he steals from a liposuction clinic. Tyler then sells this soap back to high-end department
stores, making an almost infinite margin of profit selling rich women’s fat back to them. Soap-making is a bold way of criticizing the wealthy, but it is also surreptitious in that the consumers of this soap are not aware that their own fat is in the soap. Once again, there is a level of removal in soap-making because it does not directly criticize the wealthy and their habits of mass-consumption. The situational irony involved in Tyler’s soap-making exploits is clever, yet the act allows the narrator to maintain his distance from society and does nothing to enhance his sense of immediacy to life. Direct criticism of American culture is not achieved until the creation of Project Mayhem, which in many ways is the sequel to fight club.
Project Mayhem

Project Mayhem is an attempt to spread the enlightenment that members of fight club experience to the rest of the populous by destroying institutions, in the Foucauldian sense, that repress humanity. Tyler structures Project Mayhem similarly to terrorist organizations that commit violent acts in the name of an intolerant ideology. Members are subjected to an intense initiation process, where applicants wait on the narrator’s front porch for three days and endure constant barrages of insults. Tyler and the narrator “tell the applicant to go away, and if his resolve is so strong that he waits at the entrance without food or shelter or encouragement for three days, then and only then can he enter and begin training” (Palahniuk 129). The men in Project Mayhem sleep in bunks in the narrator’s basement, steal fat from liposuction clinics to ensure the continuation of Tyler’s soap-making enterprise, and perform household tasks while Tyler imbues them with mind-numbing ideology. The official ideology of Project Mayhem takes the opposite approach of most religions, and instead of purporting that each person is a precious individual, the official doctrine states, “You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everyone else, and we are all part of the same compost pile…. Our culture has made us all the same…. Individually, we are nothing” (Palahniuk 134). Project Mayhem’s message is that everyone is equal, but instead of being equal in greatness, all of humanity is equal in its worthlessness. Tyler refers to his constituents as space monkeys, a reference to the monkeys that were launched into space to test the earliest rockets and ensure that they were safe for human use. This reflects the experimental nature of the ideology and shows that the constituents have been reduced to something less than human. Despite claims that this ideology offers freedom, the narrator notes that the space monkeys endlessly mill about the house, silently tending to the garden or performing small tasks while repeating excerpts of
Tyler’s ideology. In the midst of this, Tyler reveals that “no one understands the whole plan, but each guy is strained to do one simple task perfectly” (Palahniuk 130). By compartmentalizing the structure of Project Mayhem, Tyler ensures that no one person can defect and destroy the organization. This structure is prevalent in terrorist organizations as it allows terrorist groups to function autonomously, eliminates the need for direct leadership, and infinitely complicates the task of eradicating the group through law enforcement mechanisms.

In Project Mayhem, members come up with their own ideas for “projects,” which are essentially acts of terrorism or vandalism, and are also responsible for completing homework that Tyler assigns to them. Projects frequently involve blowing up buildings using homemade explosives, and one project involves the narrator turning his boss’s computer monitor into a bomb. Throughout the novel, the narrator’s boss questions the narrator’s numerous wounds and repeatedly instructs him to stop coming to work covered in bloodstains. When the bomb explodes, resulting in the death of his boss and the destruction of the entire office building, the narrator has successfully executed an act of violence which frees him from the last controlling institution in his life. Each small project in some way seeks to destroy existing institutions or liberate mankind from the repressive apparatuses of modern society. The first project in Project Mayhem involved all of the members, who were instructed to start a fight with a random passerby and lose. By forcing people to fight, the members of Project Mayhem attempt to lead others down the same path to self-destruction and enlightenment through violence that they have taken.

Though different projects have different goals, the overarching aim of Project Mayhem is “to teach each man in the project that he [has] the power to control history” (Palahniuk 122). The narrator argues that “for thousands of years, human beings had screwed up and trashed and
crapped on this planet, and now history expected [him] to clean up after everyone” (Palahniuk 124). Mankind is on a course dictated almost exclusively by people who are no longer alive through the influence of historical accounts and the weight that Western culture places on lessons learned in the past. This spurs the narrator to break this pre-set course by destroying evidence of the civilizations and people who came before him. By physically erasing history and destroying all records of it, the narrator hopes to take control of the present because, after all, “this is [his] world, [his] world, and all those ancient people are dead” (Palahniuk 124). Though the broader goal of the project is to demonstrate that “each of us can take control of the world,” Tyler’s direction in the project is more specific. Tyler aims to eventually destroy society and place everyone on a post-apocalyptic form of even footing by erasing financial debt and destroying material wealth. Tyler begins accomplishing these objectives through various “homework assignments,” such as destroying luxury cars in dealer lots, sabotaging fancy receptions with paintball guns, or destroying paintings at museums. Oddly, the institutions that Tyler is determined to destroy do not force humanity into repression. Credit card companies do not make people accumulate debt; they merely present an opportunity for people to make that choice. Similarly, luxury car dealerships offer people the opportunity to purchase an expensive automobile, but they do not force people to value expensive cars. Though homework assignments are designed to teach people of the folly in ascribing so much significance to mere physical objects, they ultimately do not address the underlying attitudes that allow credit card companies and luxury car dealerships to flourish. Whether or not these assignments successfully enlighten others or simply manage to instill anger in their targets remains unacknowledged.

Perhaps the most notable Project Mayhem homework assignment involves the narrator, who is instructed to bring Tyler twelve driver’s licenses to demonstrate that he made twelve
human sacrifices (Palahniuk 151). The narrator takes this to mean that he should liberate twelve people and proceeds to a 24-hour convenience store, waits for the cashier, Raymond K. Hessel, to finish his shift, then holds Raymond at gunpoint. The narrator then describes what will happen to Raymond after he shoots him, saying, “One minute you’re a person, the next minute, you’re an object, and Mom and Dad would have to call old doctor whoever and get your dental records because there wouldn’t be much left of your face” (Palahniuk 153). By describing death in this manner, the narrator sufficiently terrifies Raymond, enough so that Raymond believes that he will die and has nothing to lose in answering the narrator’s questions honestly. After discovering that Raymond has always dreamed of becoming a veterinarian but cannot afford to go back to school, the narrator offers Raymond the option of going back to school or being dead. The narrator then adds a threat, saying he will check on Raymond “in three months, and then in six months, and then in a year, and if [Raymond] isn’t back in school on his way to becoming a veterinarian, [he] will be dead” (Palahniuk 154).

Though the narrator’s approach to liberating Raymond is brutal, he “saves” Raymond from a life of earning minimum-wage at monotonous retail jobs. By removing the choice from the equation—the choice between taking a risk and going back to school or continuing the safer route of working a minimum-wage job—the narrator is improving Raymond’s life by providing the incentive needed to pull Raymond out of the routine in which he is trapped. In each of these homework assignments, violence seeks to encourage enlightenment through the destruction of physical objects that are symbolic of either wealth or repressive modern institutions. In this setting, the role of violence departs from its usual functions in Blood Meridian in that it seeks to achieve a productive end goal. The threat of violence forces Raymond into liberation from his repressive job, though the conditions that the narrator sets subject him to the threat of violence.
and the narrator’s will. Instead of violence committed for the sake of violence, violence in this instance is utilized to accomplish a specific objective, perverse as the reasoning behind the action may be.

Homework assignments for Project Mayhem are risky, and casualties in the course of completing assignments eventually become inevitable. However, not even the bodies of the members of Project Mayhem go to waste. While walking around the garden at the house on Paper Street, the narrator notes “a little spot of gold in the dirt” which is “a molar with a gold filling. Next to it surface two more molars with silver amalgam fillings. It’s a jawbone” (Palahniuk 136). The corpses of members are buried in the backyard and act as a fertilizer for a beautifully maintained garden, full of herbs and flowers, which space monkeys use to make soap. The lawn is fertilized with “bags of blood meal to boost the iron in the soil and bags of bone meal to boost the phosphorus” (Palahniuk 131). Incorporating the fallen into the nutrients that feed the garden is Project Mayhem’s form of resurrection or life-after-death and completes the ideology that Tyler has created. Members of Project Mayhem who fall victim to acts of violence ultimately contribute to creation, as their bodies are repurposed to nourish a vibrant and thriving garden.
Gender Roles in *Fight Club*

Much like McCarthy’s West in *Blood Meridian*, the world of *Fight Club* is male-centric. No women join fight club or Project Mayhem, and the question of female membership is evaded in a manner that renders female participation unthinkable. Marla is the only female character in the novel, and though her involvement in a testicular cancer support group displays that she is unphased by traditional gender boundaries, she is the novel’s sole victim of the narrator’s actions. Like the narrator, Marla is not fatally ill, yet finds enjoyment in support groups. Throughout the narrative, she develops an emotional attachment to the narrator, but the narrator believes that she is dating Tyler and does not realize that to Marla, he and Tyler are the same person. Since the narrator’s primary personality is annoyed and somewhat repulsed by Marla, his treatment of her is abusive when he is in control of his body and when Tyler is in control, Marla becomes little more than a necessary component for violent sexual activities.

The narrator meets Marla in one of his support groups just before he destroys his apartment and forms fight club. He appears to despise Marla and they agree to attend different support groups to minimize their interactions, though in a contradictory maneuver, he insists upon exchanging numbers with her. Marla does not become an integral part of the narrative until she attempts to commit suicide one night and calls the narrator. Tyler answers the phone and takes her back to the house on Paper Street, and from this point on, Marla is increasingly present around the house. At first, the narrator refuses to speak to her, claiming “I’m not talking to Marla. She can horn in on the support groups and Tyler, but there’s no way she can be my friend” (Palahniuk 66). Previously, the narrator had a monopoly on Tyler’s attention, but as Tyler spends more time with Marla, he becomes increasingly jealous. Eventually, the narrator resorts to verbally abusing Marla. The first time he speaks to her at the house is an attempt to get
rid of her, yelling “Go, just go, just get out. Okay? Don’t you have a big enough chunk of my life, yet?” (Palahniuk 66). The narrator’s prose drips with disdain and resentment, yet Marla responds by kissing his cheek and telling him to call her so they can talk. Marla is discomfited by the narrator’s inconsistent treatment of her, yet she attempts to salvage her relationship with him at great emotional cost to herself. Though the narrator is unintentionally harming the Marla, Marla rarely verbally or physically attacks the narrator in her frustration. Her refusal to harm the narrator relegates her to the position of a victim and the recipient of abuse, rather than an equal in their relationship.

As though the verbal and psychological abuse that Marla withstands from the narrator were not enough, Tyler also manipulates Marla for personal gain. Marla believes that one day she will need to get collagen injected into her lips, but since she has little body fat, her mother sends her bags of fat that she stockpiles in the narrator’s freezer. Before Tyler’s soap production scheme hits a large enough scale to justify stealing bags of fat from liposuction clinics, he sends candy bars and notes to Marla’s mother to have her FedEx more fat, which he then turns into soap. Though the prospect of storing human fat in a freezer for later use is immensely disturbing, Tyler uses this fat without Marla’s knowledge or consent. Eventually, she opens the freezer to discover that her entire stockpile of fat has disappeared. Marla’s reaction marks the sole instance in the novel where she completely loses control and lashes out against the narrator. She chases the narrator around the house, “one swipe of her fingernails behind” him (Palahniuk 93). Despite Marla’s attempts to harm the narrator, he ultimately escapes the house unscathed and unaffected by Marla’s reaction. Marla is repeatedly cheated in her interactions with the narrator, continuously suffering at his hands while he responds to her requital with apathy.
Marla and Tyler constantly partake in unnecessarily obnoxious sex, which instead of constituting a loving act, is a furtherance of the violence inherent in their relationship. The first night that they sleep together, they “had sex about ten times” and “Marla said she wanted to get pregnant” so she could “have Tyler’s abortion” (Palahniuk 59). Having sex ten times in a single night is a display of rapacious sexual appetite as opposed to affection, and Marla’s desire to have Tyler’s abortion advances the sense of almost animalistic violence intrinsic in their relationship. Marla later notes that “the condom is the glass slipper of our generation. You slip it on when you meet a stranger. You dance all night, then you throw it away” (Palahniuk 66). Marla attributes little value to sexual intercourse, and her view of condoms and casual sex exhibits the transient nature of her interactions with strangers. Since Marla claims that the condom is the glass slipper of an entire generation and not merely her own glass slipper, this statement opens into a criticism of contemporary American society. The glass slipper from Cinderella represents romance and chivalry, but Marla’s statement suggests the death of romance and sexual self-restraint. Palahniuk’s depictions of sexual intercourse in relation to Tyler and Marla indicates that violence in American society is inescapable, even in an act that is traditionally purported as a loving and meaningful emotional connection between two people.
The Legitimacy of Tyler’s Ideology

The narrator’s fragile emotional state calls the legitimacy of fight club into question. From Tyler’s skewed perspective, the proximity to violence that fight club and Project Mayhem provide is truly beneficial to the men who participate. However, based upon the narrator’s less-involved vantage point, the reader perceives that Project Mayhem exhibits the qualities of an extremist ideology led by a madman. The organization of Project Mayhem and Tyler’s justification for terrorist acts are inseparable from the structure and belief systems found in most terrorist organizations. Tyler seeks to free people from repression, yet Project Mayhem is just another domestic terrorist organization that causes societal harm and physically damages cities, but accomplishes no real purpose. Homework assignments fail to rectify the widespread societal beliefs that lead to mass-consumption or debt-accumulation. Project Mayhem succeeds in vandalizing or destroying some of the structures that enable these behaviors, but the underlying problems that give rise to the repressive institutions that Project Mayhem target go unaddressed.

Apart from the flaws in Tyler’s ideology, Palahniuk’s decision to place a mentally unstable person as the founder of an ideology based on violence displays his condemnation of fight club and Project Mayhem. The narrator made decisions pertaining to fight club and Project Mayhem while his alternate personality was in control of his body, decisions of which he was unaware, which renders the logic that supports his ideology nugatory. Throughout the novel, the narrator purports that violence is an escape from society’s encouragement of consumerism, yet the ideology that he establishes is no less coercive or liberated than the one that he seeks to replace.

In *Fight Club*, violence is never portrayed as a force of pure destruction, as even the destructive aspects of violence serve a greater purpose. The frontier space that the characters
occupy produces the appearance of violence functioning as a force of good, forming a path to self-improvement and enlightenment, as well as acting as a force of creation. Violence is glorified and becomes a type of religion for the members of fight club and Project Mayhem. It adds purpose to their lives and allows them to fight the forces and institutions that repress them on a daily basis, as well as acting as a vehicle for their own self-discovery. In the real world, this type of violence results in numerous casualties and has countless negative consequences—acts of terrorism are rarely perpetrated without causing deaths, and in the fight clubs that people formed in the wake of Fight Club’s publication, fighters sustained such severe injuries that they often died. Violence rarely acts in this manner, yet the void that the characters inhabit in Fight Club, where they are free from the constraints of law and society, allows violence to function as a positive force, acting as a means of escape and eventually salvation for the characters in the novel.
Relation to American Society

Apposing *Fight Club* and *Blood Meridian* allows similarities between the works to emerge, connections which create a dialogue about the place of violence in contemporary American society. The glorification of violence and the depiction of violence acts as paths to redemption are primary themes in both novels. These portrayals reflect a general lure toward violence in American culture, present in action films, television shows, and video games. In *Blood Meridian*, violence is glorified through McCarthy’s detailed depictions of the characters as they conduct warfare. In *Fight Club*, violence is condoned primarily through its function in the ideology that the narrator creates and its use as a vehicle for emancipation from the tedium and oppressiveness of everyday life. Though the characters in both novels condone violence as a positive force, the authors’ elaborate depictions of violent scenes, particularly the massacre scenes in *Blood Meridian*, render violent acts repulsive. McCarthy’s exhaustive portrayal of each fight scene is overwhelming, and his exaggeration of the approach with which novels and movies glorify violence relegates the men’s actions to the realm of the grotesque. Violent scenes in *Fight Club* are condemned through the mindlessness of the characters who perpetrate the violence and their blind belief in a twisted ideology, rather than through horrifying depictions of violent acts themselves. Both McCarthy and Palahniuk elevate conventional, exalted depictions of fighting to an inordinate level, which ultimately renders physical acts of violence repugnant and forms a criticism of the violent acts that their characters commit.

McCarthy and Palahniuk stage their novels in frontier realms, allowing the violence in their novels to progress into absurdity. Both of the novels unfold on the fringes of civilization, where rule of law is weak and law-enforcement mechanisms are ineffectual or non-existent. In the United States today, the warfare that Glanton’s men conduct could never materialize as the
West is now populated by American citizens, the rule of law is strong, and the police or United States Army would surely intervene with any attempts to terrorize United States citizens. By staging *Blood Meridian* in a time before the U.S. government held a monopoly on force in the West, violent acts can evolve and progress in an unrestrained manner. Similarly, the characters in *Fight Club* find a niche where they can commit violent acts without intervention from citizens or the police. The narrator’s location within the fringes of society allows his ideology to progress in a preposterous manner, to the point where countless space monkeys swell the ranks of Project Mayhem and the narrator is on the cusp of wreaking havoc on the American population. Frontier settings are integral to these novels, as the plot lines and characters decisions could only unfold in such extreme manners when unfettered by outside interference.

American society and Western thought value the individual, which contributes to an emphasis on individual action recurrent throughout McCarthy and Palahniuk’s works. McCarthy’s most eloquent depictions of violence relate to the kid when he is separated from Glanton’s men, as when he kills the barman in Bexam. Acts of individual violence are markedly more palatable than the gang violence in which Glanton’s men participate. When the kid, in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, single-handedly defeats multiple men in combat, he is portrayed as something akin to a shining icon of individuality, but when Glanton’s men slaughter villages of Native Americans or terrorize towns, they frequently exhibit animalistic tendencies. Similarly, the narrator in *Fight Club* exhibits self-sufficiency and independence, traits that are also esteemed in American society. The narrator establishes fight club and his ideology of violence single-handedly, then devotes himself to creating a network of fight clubs and Project Mayhem cells that span the nation. This network of thousands of men is controlled by a single person, a concentrated version of the structure of command which is familiar in Western
civilization. The weight on individual actions present in both works reflects the importance of individuals in American society. Relating to violence in particular, most violent acts depicted in mainstream media are executed by a single person. Examination of mass-shootings in the United States reveals that most are committed by a single person, and that partner or team mass shootings, such as the shooting at Columbine, are relatively rare. Blood Meridian and Fight Club reflect this reality, rendering individual action in a more acceptable light than acts of collective violence.

The female characters in McCarthy and Palahniuk’s novels reflect another important truth about violence in the United States. Females are usually the recipients, not perpetrators, of violent acts. Of the 62 mass killings in the U.S. that have occurred in the past 30 years, only one has been committed by a woman (Farhi). The women in Blood Meridian are cheated, raped, or killed by Glanton’s Gang—they are never treated as equals to the men and merely serve as victims of violence. Though Marla is a more developed character, she too remains uninvolved in the violent acts that the members of fight club and Project Mayhem commit. McCarthy and Palahniuk do not create a commentary on the place of women in relation to violence by building strong female characters and victimizing them to spur their readers into sympathy. Their discourse is formed largely by omission, marked by both the absence of female characters who commit violent acts and the absence an explicit dialogue that brings the place of women to the forefront of the narrative. Male characters dominate these narratives to the extent that the role of women as objects of violence appears commonplace. The authors’ portrayal of violence against women, unaccompanied by an explicit investigation of the phenomenon, parallels the quiet, concealed victimization of women that characterizes many domestic abuse cases. Though McCarthy and Palahniuk do not make grand statements concerning feminism, their refusal to
specifically address the role of women in violent settings echoes the quiet position of many women in the United States as recipients of violence.

The role of violence is integral to the plots of these two novels, yet McCarthy and Palahniuk show that these types of violence are unsustainable. Insanity affects both the kid and the narrator—the kid eventually loses his grasp on reality as a result of the atrocities that he has witnessed, while the narrator’s emotional state drives him to seek out violence and form fight club. The compromised mental health of both characters forms a condemning criticism of their violent acts, and the final scenes of both novels demonstrate the unmaintainable nature of such levels of violence. Scalp-hunters and mercenaries no longer have a place in the settled West at the end of Blood Meridian. The narrator’s eventual discovery of his actions and subsequent attempts to disband Project Mayhem exhibits his realization that the acts that he has committed are wrong and that the ideology that Tyler has established is entirely manic. Though the elevated role of combat in both novels initially seems to glorify physical brutality, the authors’ emphasis on violence serves to criticize the prevalence of violent acts within the novels. The justifications and mentalities for these acts reflect mentalities prevalent in the United States, ultimately allowing the works to form a critique of the American glorification of and gravitation toward violence as a form of escapism from contemporary society.

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