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ENGL 607 – Film in Classroom
17 November, 2009

I am Jack's Father: A Fight Club Romance

For all the revisions Batman has gone through over the years, his writers have clung tenaciously to his origin story: “Young Bruce [Wayne] and his parents had just seen a movie, and as they were walking home through the dark streets of Gotham City, they were attacked and shot.” (Lang 206) This traumatic event and a desire for revenge combined in young Bruce’s psyche, inspiring him to become a masked crime-fighter as an adult – but did he really ever grow up? In his essay *Batman and Robin: A Family Romance*, Robert Lang argues that Bruce Wayne is in fact an adult child, and that Batman is not only Bruce Wayne’s crime-fighting alter-ego, but also his surrogate father. Key to Lang’s argument is Freud’s Oedipal Conflict; named for the myth of Oedipus who slew his father and married his mother, this conflict arises within a child as it comes to understand the nature of human genders. The child (male in this construction) fixates on the mother, not only loving but desiring her. The father is seen as a barrier to the mother, who will react to the child’s attempt by punishing it (likely via castration), and so the child eventually resolves the conflict by shifting focus to another “object,” generally other women; failure to do so leaves the child trapped, resulting in adult neuroses. However, Lang argues that Bruce’s parents were killed before he could resolve the conflict, forcing him to enact Freud’s “family romance”, which results in his “replacing the real father by a superior one . . . an expression of the child’s longing for the happy, vanished days when his father seemed to him the noblest and strongest of men.” (qtd in Lang 207)

Alfred Pennyworth, the Wayne family butler, is often cited as a father figure, but as a servant he cannot be superior to Bruce’s fallen parent. In the absence of an appropriate focus,

Bruce fixates on becoming one, training his body and mind to achieve an ideal male physique. He uses this physique, along with some clever symbolism and gadgetry, to avenge his parents both directly (against their killer) and indirectly (against criminal society in general). Lang suggests that vengeance (and rescue) is a common fantasy among boys in patriarchal societies, arising from both their perception of the father as imago and a desire to somehow repay the parents for giving them life. (208-9) Freud believed that this fantasy arises from the child's desire to "have by his mother a son who is like himself; in other words, in the rescue-phantasy he is completely identifying himself with his father. All his instincts . . . find satisfaction in the single wish *to be his own father.*" (qtd in Lang 209) Bruce's creation of Batman as a superior father figure allows him to participate in the family romance, but he is crippled by the fact that his mother is also dead. Lang points out that in a typical rescue fantasy, the mother remains alive to be claimed by the son; not so for Bruce. Batman can stand in as father via the family romance, but with no mother to claim Bruce is locked in a "perpetually unresolved oedipal crisis." (Lang 210)

A more radical, and in the end successful, version of this situation can be seen in the relationship between the main characters of *Fight Club*, a film called by Barbara Duge an exploration of "the struggle for masculine identity in late twentieth-century America . . . [in which] An unnamed¹ protagonist is dissatisfied with his life and attempts to build a new identity through the creation of an underground, bare-knuckle boxing club, known as *Fight Club*." (300) The club is later used as a recruitment pool for Project Mayhem, a homosocial² terrorist group

1 Although unnamed in the film, most writers refer to the protagonist as Jack, after a scene in which he refers to himself as "Jack's . . . complete lack of surprise." Use of this signifier is supported by the DVD commentary, which reveals that the script also refers to the character by this name.

2 In order to be homosocial, a group must have two characteristics: a literal "spatial separation from female spheres . . . and [that] in developing (moral) attitudes, (political) opinions, and systems of values, members of the same sex are the most important significant others." (Meuser 396)

headed by Tyler Durden, co-founder of Fight Club (and, as Jack and the audience later learn, Jack's alternate personality). William Singleton blames the initial dissatisfaction and lack of identity on an absence of a paternal figure in the lives of the characters, and claims that "to compensate for a lack of fathering, the main characters attempt to father themselves into manhood." (135) Like Batman, Jack must find a way to bring himself into adulthood in the absence of a father figure; but where Bruce Wayne curates a deliberate alter-ego to act as a father figure, Jack's mind creates a completely separate identity.

After six months of insomnia, Jack begins attending support groups for the dying. He does not attend because he is sick; initially he goes simply to, as his doctor advises, "see real pain." While at his first meeting of Remaining Men Together (for men who have cancer of the testicles), he meets Bob, a former bodybuilder who developed large, feminine breasts as a result of hormone therapy. With his male physique, absent testes and breasts, Bob is a "'bisexed' figure that [Chris Straayer] calls the She-man . . . [in whom] the co-presence of seemingly mutually exclusive body parts . . . undermines normative understandings of two-sexedness *and* renders powerful the respective performers." (Erhart, 176) It is in the arms of this combined male/female, father/mother figure that Jack finds a sobbing release, reclaiming the emotions he has been unable to express for so long, and Jack is at last able sleep soundly. However, the appearance of Marla Singer ruins the effect. Marla first appears at Remaining Men Together, as Jack and Bob hold each other, her actual femininity ruining the illusion Bob presents. Marla appears at many of Jack's support groups, and it becomes clear that she, like Jack, is not dying. The presence of another "faker" forces Jack to confront his own falsehood, reminding him of the lie his life is, and unable to cry he is unable to sleep; Tyler resurfaces as a result of the feminine intruding on Jack's life, and because of Marla he becomes more than just an alter-ego – he

becomes a father. Although Jack's fixation on Marla is disruptive to his sleep, it sets the groundwork for him to re-enter the Oedipal conflict.

Although we later learn that Tyler emerged at the same time that Jack developed insomnia, the two characters "meet" for the first time on an airplane just before Jack discovers that his condo has been destroyed. Having no real friends, Jack calls Tyler to meet for a beer. Tyler later agrees to take Jack in, but first requests that Jack hit him "as hard as [he] can." The two fight, and it is these first few punches that are the genesis of Fight Club, and as the pair cohabitate we begin to see the Freudian issues at work here; Jack tells us about his father, who left when Jack was six years old. He moved to a new area and started another family, then, six years later, repeated the process. At this age, Jack would be locked into the Oedipal struggle, still viewing his father as an idealized male figure standing between him and his mother. Although physically absent, it seems to be revealed that Jack's father was at least available, and sought as a source of advice, when Tyler³ commiserates:

Tyler: "My dad never went to college, so it was real important that I go."

Jack: "That sounds familiar."

Tyler: "So I graduate, I call him up long distance. I say, 'Dad, now what?'"

This exchange reveals that the father was not only still implicitly present, but that he was sought (repeatedly, it turns out) as a source of advice and authority. The mixed message sent by this relationship leaves Jack unable to resolve the crisis – his father is absent, and so there is no strong motivation to shift focus away from the mother, and yet his father remains accessible enough to threaten castration. Unable to resolve his incestuous desire, Jack shifts his affections

³ As Tyler and Jack inhabit the same body, they logically share the same father biologically speaking.

completely to the items and furniture he orders from catalogs, an antisocial satisfaction of his instincts that shows him to be trapped in childhood (Segal 122).

However, this is a temporary solution, and eventually Jack begins to break down in the face of his empty life. In order to resolve the Oedipal conflict, he must replace his parents with superior specimens. In the absence of the father, a surrogate must be found, but Jack's world is populated by others just like him – bland office drones who seem more concerned with the material than the emotional. Nature abhors a vacuum, and so Jack creates Tyler, an alternate personality “independent” of Jack's conscious life, and in many ways Jack's ideal male; Tyler himself hints at his origins and idealized status:

You were looking for a way to change your life. You could not do this on your own. All the ways you wish you could be, that's me. I look like you wanna look, I fuck like you wanna fuck, I am smart, capable, and most importantly I am free in all the ways that you are not.

Tyler exists to provide a strong male role model for Jack. Once Jack becomes aware of Tyler (though well before he learns that he IS Tyler), a complex relationship develops, with Tyler acting as a mentor or teacher to Jack. His lessons are chaotic and often brutal, but represent a hypermasculine learning curve that must appeal to a self-described “30 year old boy.” Once actualized as a personality, Tyler quickly begins to amass a following, first in Fight Club, then in Project Mayhem. Each step on this ladder nudges him, and by association Jack, higher within the homosocial strata. Interestingly, Tyler is depicted as winning his fights, whereas Jack (who shares his physical form) consistently loses them – it is only when a potential rival appears, in the form of a blonde youth to whom Tyler shows affection that Jack is shown triumphant,

jealously striking down the would-be sibling/usurper. Slowly, Jack begins to measure up to his father.

Just as Batman becomes a superior surrogate father for Bruce, Tyler becomes one for Jack; both now have the potential for resolution of the Oedipal conflict. Lang points out, however, that Bruce never manages to do so, failing to find a surrogate mother figure, and instead shifting his fixation on Robin as an object to be possessed and protected. Until now, Jack has filled the void left by his parents with his “versatile solutions for modern living;” but a virile alpha male like Tyler can’t be without a female. The solution presents itself in Marla Singer, the very same woman who initially disrupted Jack’s support group schedule. After she calls Jack to describe her suicide attempt, Tyler brings her home and the two begin what can only be described as an enthusiastic sex life. The disgust on Jack’s face as he first takes in this new development says a great deal, both about his fixated opinion of Marla, and also his movement within the oedipal crisis. According to Freud, the child experiences a feeling of “disgust and horror . . . when he understands that his parents are sexual beings.” (qtd in Lang 223) Tyler and Marla taking up together provoke just such a reaction in Jack, a reaction that continues to fester as the pair engages in their boisterous lovemaking. Interestingly, with the exception of a single moment early on, Tyler and Marla never appear on screen or in the same room together, prompting Jack to remark that his biological parents did much the same, and that he feels like he is “six years old again, passing messages between parents.” Tyler makes Jack promise not to talk about him to Marla, providing a layer of insulation between her and his potential rival.

As time passes within the film, we see Marla reaching out to Jack. Of course, we know in retrospect that she was in fact reaching out to Tyler, but in the context of Jack’s oedipal struggle, she begins to take on a role which is part nurturing, part alluring – the mother he will

seek to win from the father. She talks to him soothingly, makes clumsy passes at him related to clothing choices, puts her hand over his crotch (recalling an earlier incident when she grabbed it threateningly), offers him food, asks him to check her breast for lumps, and at the last expresses deep concern over his bullet wound. She never fully takes on the role of mother, instead remaining in the Freudian space as an object to be desired and claimed from the father. Jack's attitude towards her softens over time to the point where they can converse civilly, and he breaks his promise to Tyler to ask what she is getting from their relationship, wondering why weak people seem to cling to strong ones. She notices the chemical burn on his hand at this point, and tries to get him to reveal who did it to him, her concern evident. In a moment caught between them, Tyler's words ending the conversation are repeated to Marla by Jack, reasserting Tyler's patriarchal authority over both of them.

Jack grows under Tyler's tutelage, becoming stronger and more educated. Tyler provides a nurturing aspect as well; just as Batman holds the image of young Bruce's innocence (transferred onto Dick Grayson/Robin), Tyler protects Jack by keeping him "innocent" of Project Mayhem's activities, and despite his violent tendencies shows tenderness and support as well; he takes Jack in, gets him a job at the Pressman Hotel, and even reassures Jack about his deteriorating physical appearance, remind him that "even the Mona Lisa is falling apart." The pair golf together, complete homework (for Fight Club) together, and Tyler clips out and displays newspaper headlines about the group's (and thus, Jack's) successes. In a pivotal moment, after Tyler causes a car crash that injures Jack, Tyler cradles him, and then puts him to bed. After telling him a story, he says "feel better, champ."

When Jack recovers from the wreck enough to get up again, Tyler is nowhere to be found. Jack laments, "My father dumped me. Tyler dumped me." Shortly afterwards, Bob is

killed on a mission for Project Mayhem; the death of his one-time father/mother seems to galvanize Jack, leading him to start investigating Tyler's activities. Jack finds airline ticket stubs in Tyler's name – unlike his biological father, his surrogate father has left a trail to follow, and follow it Jack does. It is during this journey that Jack learns that he IS Tyler Durden. The final piece falls into place when he Marla calls him Tyler over the phone. Tyler appears, and reveals the truth before taking over Jack's body once more to make a number of phone calls, activating the next stage of Project Mayhem. Having become aware of the threat posed by Tyler and his army, Jack resolves to put an end to it by any means.

He first tries to save Marla; after admitting to her that he is very fond of her, he gives her money and puts her on a bus to an unknown destination in the hope that it will help her escape from Tyler; unfortunately, the audience sees her surrounded on the bus by dark forms, cronies of Tyler making sure she doesn't escape. Jack then goes to the police, trying to expose the organization. Unfortunately for him, three of the officers he confesses to turn out to be members of Project Mayhem, to whom Tyler has issued explicit orders in the case of defection: "If anyone ever interferes with Project Mayhem -- even [Tyler/Jack] – we gotta [sic] get his balls." Jack appeals several times, threatening, denying, and ordering them to stop in an attempt to prevent what is coming, but in the end is held down, legs apart, ready for the knife. Castration is a major theme for Freud, and in an aggressively masculine organization like Project Mayhem, the ultimate punishment would be feminization (and thus expulsion). Fortunately, Jack is able to get hold of an officer's gun, and uses it to escape. The gun itself becomes a phallic signifier; it symbolizes Jack's emerging finally into manhood, and beginning to challenge those who were once his superiors.

Alone and not knowing who can be trusted, Jack heads for one of the detonation sites, intent on stopping Tyler himself. Arriving at the first site, he locates a van filled with explosives. Looking at the timer and ignition mechanisms, Tyler appears to question Jack, belittle him and try to prevent him from stopping the explosion. Jack concludes, rightly, that if Tyler knows how to disarm the bomb, then so does he. Successfully stopping the timer, revealing his equal knowledge, enrages Tyler, who attacks Jack. Jack's gun/phallus is useless against Tyler⁴, and we watch Tyler beat Jack severely, proving his physical superiority over his son (a frequent theme of sitcom families, as well).

The closing scene of the film features Jack trying to reason with Tyler, who now holds the gun. Marla is being brought in to "[tie] up loose ends," and Tyler makes it clear that he intends to take over their body permanently. Having failed to physically defeat Tyler, and unable to reason with him, Jack attempts to work out a solution rationally. Knowing that Tyler is not physically real, he realizes that the gun is not in Tyler's hand, but in his own. Jack puts the gun to his head and, after a brief exchange, fires a shot into his own open mouth, echoing Oedipus's own self-mutilation in penance for his own patricide. Project Mayhem soldiers arrive bringing Marla and Jack orders everyone to leave her with him. She at first harangues him, but when she sees his injury becomes instantly concerned and nurturing, staunching the blood with a piece of cloth. Jack tells her that "everything's gonna [sic] be fine," and explosions blossom outside. Jack takes Marla's hand as building after building collapses into ruin, and a single frame of a man's erect penis flashes both in homage to Tyler, and to signify Jack's triumphant eruption and violent into manhood.

⁴ A thread that begins earlier when Marla assures Tyler that the rubber phallus on her dresser is "no threat to [him]."

In order to rise from the obscurity of his position as an automobile recall coordinator, Jack must find his parents, figures absent from both the film and his life. Unable to face his biological parents, he invents for himself a father in the character of Tyler Durden; this same father goes on to develop a kingdom of underground boxing groups and to claim Marla Singer as his queen. Otto Rank, a colleague of Freud, gives us the concept of a Freudian Hero, one who has risen from obscurity to the throne and gained a mate by killing their father (Segal 121-3). Over the course of the film *Fight Club*, Jack does just this: he kills Tyler Durden, claims Marla Singer, and gains the throne of a nationwide urban terrorist organization - a truly heroic feat for a boy of humble origins.

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