

PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ALGERIA
MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF ORAN 2 MOHAMED BEN AHMED



FACULTY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of English in
Candidacy for the Degree of “Doctorat es Science” in American Literature

**Nihilism and the Loss of Traditional Values in
Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, Chuck Palahniuk’s
Fight Club and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road***

Presented by:
Mr. BOULANOUAR Abdelkrim

Supervised by:
Prof. CHAMI Nidhal

Board of Examiners:

GHENIM Naima	Prof.	University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed	Chair
CHAMI Nidhal	Prof.	University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed	Supervisor
DJAFRI Yasmina	Prof.	University of Mostaganem Abdelhamid Ibn Badis	Examiner
BOUHASSOUNE Azzedine	Prof.	University of Ain Temouchent Belhadj Bouchaib	Examiner
FALI Wafaa	MCA	University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed	Examiner
HAMMOUCHE Malika	MCA	Graduate School of Economics (ESE)	Examiner

2025-2026

DECLARATION

I, hereby, declare that this work has not already been accepted in substance for any degree, and is not concurrently being submitted in candidature for any other degree. The researching, preparation and presentation of the thesis have been undertaken entirely by the author.

Abdelkrim BOULANOUAR

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents and my sister

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my thanks and gratitude to Professor CHAMI Nidhal whose diligence and patience had been crucial to the completion of this work. She had been one of the first teachers who introduced me to the beauty of literature and she ushered me to the realm of research by supervising my BA dissertation in 2010. I was exceptionally fortunate to have her as my supervisor again.

I am immeasurably indebted to my former supervisor, Pr. BOUHADIBA Malika who believed in me more than anyone else. Through her encouragements, she kept me from abandoning my research and convinced me that I had something valuable to add to the Academic world. I am also grateful to the members of the jury Pr. GHENIM Naima, Pr. DJAFRI Yasmina, Pr. BOUHASSOUNE Azzedine, Dr. FALI Wafaa, and Dr. HAMMOUCHE Malika.

ABSTRACT

The quest for purpose and the struggle to transcend existential emptiness have always been essential themes in philosophy and literature. Both disciplines address the human need for higher ideals and the subsequent descent into nihilism that occurs when these markers of meaning are lost. Postmodern American writers have revealed the urgency of the problem through works that treat a culture that leaves its individuals devoid of a sense of direction. Through the study of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, this thesis attempts to explain the social and personal causes and effects of the general mood of confusion, existential void and moral ambiguity that follow the abandonment of traditional values. Dealing with such complex issues necessarily requires a multidisciplinary approach. Questions around morality and the meaning of life are investigated through a philosophical lens, drawing on the works of thinkers such as Nietzsche, Kant, Heidegger and Baudrillard. As for the protagonists' fragmented psyche, it is explored using psychological interpretations such as the Jungian treatment of the subconscious. Both approaches are integrated into the literary analysis of the three novels and their prominent postmodern themes. This research suggests that the disoriented characters who attempt to replace their lost cultural ideals by conformity, consumerism, destructive rebellion, or superstition fail to cure their existential void. The alienating effects of capitalism and its aftermath, as well as their own dysfunctional lives, keep them prey to nihilism which can only be overcome through the retrieval or the creation of strong governing values.

Key words: Contemporary American Literature; Existentialism; Morality; Nihilism; Postmodernism; Truth.

Résumé

La quête du sens et la lutte pour transcender le vide existentiel ont toujours été des thèmes essentiels dans la philosophie et la littérature. Ces deux disciplines abordent le besoin humain d'idéaux suprêmes, et la descente dans le nihilisme qui survient lorsque ces marqueurs de sens sont perdus. Les écrivains américains postmodernes ont révélé l'urgence du problème à travers des œuvres qui traitent d'une culture qui prive ses individus de tout sens de l'orientation. À travers l'étude de « White Noise » de Don DeLillo, « Fight Club » de Chuck Palahniuk et « The Road » de Cormac McCarthy, cette thèse tente d'expliquer les causes et les effets sociaux et personnels de l'état général de confusion, de vide existentiel et d'ambiguïté morale qui suit l'abandon des valeurs traditionnelles. Traiter de questions aussi complexes nécessite une approche multidisciplinaire. Les questions relatives à la moralité et au sens de la vie sont examinées sous un angle philosophique, en s'appuyant sur les travaux de penseurs tels que Nietzsche, Kant, Heidegger et Baudrillard. Quant à la psyché fragmentée des protagonistes, elle est explorée à l'aide d'interprétations psychologiques telles que la conception Jungienne du subconscient. Ces approches sont intégrées à l'analyse littéraire des romans et de leurs thèmes postmodernes prédominants. Cette recherche suggère que les personnages désorientés qui tentent de remplacer leurs idéaux culturels par la conformité, le consumérisme, la rébellion destructrice ou la superstition ne parviennent pas à combler leur vide existentiel. Les effets aliénants du capitalisme et ses conséquences, ainsi que leurs propres vies dysfonctionnelles, les maintiennent en proie au nihilisme, qui ne peut être surmonté que par la récupération ou la création de valeurs solides.

Mots clés : Littérature Américaine contemporaine ; Existentialisme ; Moralité ; Nihilisme ; Postmodernisme ; Vérité.

ملخص

لطالما كان البحث عن الهدف والنضال من أجل تجاوز الفراغ الوجودي من الموضوعات الأساسية في الفلسفة والأدب. تتناول كلتا التخصصات حاجة الإنسان إلى القيم العليا وما يتبع ذلك من انزلاق نحو العدمية عند فقدان تلك الرموز التي تعطي المعنى للوجود، وقد كشف الكتاب الأمريكيون ما بعد الحداثيون عن مدى إلحاحية هذه المشكلة من خلال أعمالهم التي تتناول ثقافة تجرد أفرادها من الشعور بامتلاكهم اتجاهها في الحياة. من خلال دراسة رواية "الضوضاء البيضاء" لدون دييلو، و"نادي القتال" لتشاك بالانيوك، و"الطريق" لكورماك مكارثي، تحاول هذه الأطروحة شرح الأسباب والآثار الاجتماعية والشخصية للحالة العامة من الارتباك والفراغ الوجودي والغموض الأخلاقي التي تعقب التخلي عن القيم التقليدية. يتطلب التعامل مع مثل هذه القضايا المعقدة اتباع منهجية متعددة التخصصات. يتم دراسة الأسئلة المتعلقة بالأخلاق ومعنى الحياة من خلال منظور فلسفي، بالاعتماد على أعمال مفكرين مثل نيتشه وكانط وهايدغر وبودريلارد. أما بالنسبة للنفسية المجزأة للشخصيات الرئيسية، فيتم استكشافها باستخدام تفسيرات سيكولوجية مثل معالجة يونغ للاوعي. يتم دمج كلا النهجين في التحليل الأدبي للروايات الثلاث ومواضيعها البارزة المتعلقة بما بعد الحداثة. تشير هذه الدراسة إلى أن الشخصيات المضطربة التي تحاول استبدال مُثلها الثقافية المفقودة بالامتثال أو الاستهلاك أو التمرد المدمر أو الخرافات تفشل في سد فراغها الوجودي. فالآثار الانعزالية للرأسمالية وعواقبها، بالإضافة إلى حياتهم المضطربة، تجعلهم فريسة للعدمية التي لا يمكن التغلب عليها إلا من خلال استعادة أو خلق قيم حاكمة قوية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدب الأمريكي المعاصر؛ الوجودية؛ الأخلاق؛ العدمية؛ ما بعد الحداثة؛ الحقيقة

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration.....	I
Dedication.....	II
Acknowledgements.....	III
Abstract.....	IV
Résumé.....	V
ملخص.....	VI
Table of Contents.....	VII

GENERAL INTRODUCTION.....	1
----------------------------------	----------

CHAPTER ONE: The Nihilistic Decay of Traditional Values: From philosophy to Literature

1.1. Introduction.....	21
1.2. Introduction to nihilism.....	24
1.3. Types of Nihilism:	
1.3.1. Epistemological Nihilism.....	31
1.3.2. Existential Nihilism.....	33
1.3.3. Ethical/Moral Nihilism.....	37
1.3.4. Anti-authoritarian Nihilism.....	45
1.4. Postmodern Nihilism and the Loss of Traditional Values.....	48
1.5. Devaluating Values in American Culture:	
1.5.1. Morality.....	56
1.5.2. The meaning of life.....	61
1.5.3. Truth.....	67

1.6. Conclusion.....	71
----------------------	----

**CHAPTER TWO: Epistemological Nihilism and the Devaluation of Truth and
Meaning in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise***

2.1. Introduction.....	72
2.2. “Looking for Meaning Where There is None”: Jack Gladney’s Alienation and the World of Simulacra.....	77
2.3. The Loss of Spirituality and the Void Left in its Wake.....	86
2.3.1. Television as a Deceiving Minerva.....	89
2.3.2. Science and Technology as Impotent Deities.....	95
2.4. The Fall of Wisdom: The Failure of the Family and the University to Provide Meaning and Guidance.....	101
2.5. Contending with Nihilism: Killer, Diers, Plotters and Victims:	
2.5.1. The Gladneys as the Manifestation of Nietzsche’s “Mast Man”	110
2.5.2. Murray Siskind as the Voice of Regressive Nihilism.....	120
2.5.3. Dreams of Heroic Overcoming and the Encounter with the Fragmented Postmodern Identity.....	125
2.6. Conclusion.....	130

**CHAPTER THREE: Existential Nihilism and Destructive (and Self-Destructive)
Rebellion in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club***

3.1. Introduction.....	133
3.2. A Life Worth Dying: The Social and Cultural Roots of Nihilism.....	138
3.2.1. A Dehumanizing Culture.....	139
3.2.2. The Emptiness of Consumerism.....	146

3.2.3.	A disorienting Double Reality.....	149
3.3.	The Multifaceted Neurosis of a Nietzschean “Last Man”	152
3.3.1.	Infantilism and the Oedipal Complex.....	153
3.3.2.	The Crisis of Masculinity.....	155
3.3.3.	The Tentative Acceptance of Death through its Glorification.....	158
3.4.	Fragmentation of the Self as the Manifestation of a Repressed Will to Power.....	159
3.4.1.	Tyler as a Revelation of the Unconscious Shadow.....	160
3.4.2.	Fight Clubs and Finding Meaning through the “Realness” of Pain.....	171
3.4.3.	“Putting one’s Hand to the Plough”: Active Nihilism in Project Mayhem.....	175
3.5.	The Failure of Destructive Nihilism:	
3.5.1.	The Descent into Tyranny.....	178
3.5.2.	The Meaninglessness of Inauthenticity.....	182
3.6.	Marla Singer and the Possibility of Salvation through Human Connection.....	185
3.7.	Conclusion.....	189

CHAPTER FOUR: Ethical Nihilism and the Failure of Individualistic “Will to Power” in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*

4.1.	Introduction.....	193
4.2.	Vestiges of a Failed Civilization: The Nihilistic Cosmos of <i>The Road</i> :	
4.2.1.	The Unsustainability of Civilization.....	198
4.2.2.	The Death (and rebirth) of Consumerism.....	201
4.3.	The Meaninglessness of Survival in an Indifferent Universe:	
4.3.1.	The Futility of Survival.....	205
4.3.2.	Spirituality as a Neglected Prerequisite to Hope.....	211
4.4.	Men among Wolves”: The Fall of Community and Humanity:	

4.4.1.	“The Hunter/Prey Paradigm and the Dehumanization of the “Other”	216
4.4.2.	The Failure of the Traditional Family Structure and the Reversal of Gender Roles.....	222
4.4.3.	The Boy’s Hopeless Search for Community.....	225
4.5.	Ruthless Individualism and the Fall of Morality:	
4.5.1.	Violence, Cannibalism and the Supremacy of Evil.....	228
4.5.2.	“Carrying the Fire” and the Promise of Moral Revival.....	238
4.6.	The Two Faces of Morality:	
4.6.1.	The Man: Pragmatic Morality and the Will to Survive.....	236
4.6.2.	The Boy: Moral Purity and Redemption through Self-Sacrifice.....	243
4.7.	The End of The Road: Hope in the Midst of Chaos.....	249
4.8.	Conclusion.....	251
GENERAL CONCLUSION.....		256
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....		269

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Literature introduces its readers to the depths of the human soul. Fictional works do not merely offer a depiction of events, they plunge into the microscopic details of their characters' psyche, exposing us to their motivations, insecurities and dreams in a manner akin to a psychological evaluation. At the same time, literature treats the world as a phenomenon to be scrutinized, and sometimes as a patient to be treated. It explores history with a sociological mindset and views religion with a psychological lens, broadening our horizons and sharpening our understanding of life. History can rarely provide a more vivid depiction of the American Great Depression than John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and few essays can denounce the atrocities of the Apartheid system in South Africa better than Alex La Guma's *The Stone Country* (1967). Similarly, in the case of our current study, I believe that literature can prove and explain the gradual loss of traditional Western values in postmodern American culture. Indeed, contemporary American literature has been increasingly concerned with the spiritual emptiness of late capitalism and the creeping nihilism that leaves individuals dazed in a sea of uncertainty, numbing their existential angst with consumerism and hedonism.

The many novels written on the matter testify of its significance and urgency. Since the end of World War II, American culture in particular and Western culture in general have undergone a radical change: old moral and social values have been deconstructed, deemed useless, and replaced by a glorification of individual freedom and instant gratification. Religion has gradually withdrawn from the public sphere,

and the boundaries of morality have been constantly transgressed. Advances in science have eradicated any sense of certainty and declared all truth to be relative. The price paid for the rapid progress of American society has been a renaissance of nihilism, a general refusal to be governed by higher ideals, and an emphasis on relativity. By the turn of the twentieth century, individuals were forced to seek their own meaning, lest they sink into an existential void that could only be drowned in the many distractions crafted by capitalism (consumerism, entertainment...). Here again, literature is the ideal tool to understanding this cultural phenomenon. The novels selected for this thesis do not only explore the culture that favored the expansion of nihilism, but also follow characters who suffer from a crisis of values, and who contend more or less successfully with the emptiness of their reality.

Many authors celebrate and even advocate the destruction of the old ways. The twentieth century was shaped by deconstructionists and existentialists in the likes of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre who viewed life's meaninglessness as an irrevocable fact. Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) for instance, which was influenced by Nietzsche's thought, highlighted the absurdity of life in which man's pursuit for meaning is met with silence. These ideas were very influential across the Atlantic and many American authors like John Barth quickly adopted, and even imitated their style. The departure from the old values such as the sense community and Christendom was further advocated by the writings of Ayn Rand and her philosophy of radical individualism and "rational egoism"¹. By the end of the

¹ Under rational egoism, all actions must be performed to "maximize self-interest". It is not arbitrary preferences that guide one's choices but a rational explanation of how a certain act or moral judgement benefits the individual (Shaver).

twentieth century, however, even the most nihilistic works displayed a glimpse of criticism towards the trajectory that Western societies were taking. Brett Easton Ellis's transgressive novel *American Psycho* (1991), for instance, follows a yuppie² serial killer who thrives (and self-destructs) in the void left by the destruction of cultural, spiritual and moral values in contemporary America. While acknowledging the abundance of nihilistic works that accept or even celebrate the loss of old ideals, it is important to mention that this thesis takes the opposite view and argues that the loss of higher and collective ideals is detrimental to Western culture and tragic for the individual who is forced to live in a cosmos devoid of certainty, spirituality, social trust and morality.

The topic of this thesis was born from an observation. I noticed that contemporary Western culture, which still captivates the world's imagination, lacked grand ideals. The people who once produced outstanding art and architecture, and built great empires (despite the negative and often genocidal nature of military expansion) were lost to cynicism and indifference. For instance, individuals abandoned the idea of nationhood in favor of identity politics (based on origin, political leanings, sexual orientation) to the point of burning their own national flags. Similarly, Christianity, which was a building block of Western civilization, is often scorned and ridiculed. The result of this resentment towards traditional values did not create liberated individuals. Instead, it ushered in an era of confusion where meaninglessness became the norm, and mental health issues and drug abuse reached

² Young Urban Professional: In the 1980s and 1990s, a young middle-class person with a high-paying job, engrossed in the extravagant life of the city (competitive careers, fashion, accumulating possessions...).

alarming heights. In literature, as well as in films and even music, this loss of invigorating purpose can easily be perceived. Most characters today are fragmented antiheroes and most themes rarely exceed idiosyncratic concerns and crises. Being an enthusiast for grand narratives, I could not help but lament the disappearance of the dedication to beauty, nature and intuition found in romantic literature, or the revolutionary, symbolism-charged vigor of modernism. When Hollywood attempts to adapt a great work, it looks back to Tolkien's *The Lord of The Rings* trilogy (1954-1955), Herbert's *Dune* series (1965-1985) or even classical works such as Homer's *The Odyssey* (750-650 BCE). In this thesis, I propose the idea that the impoverishment of Western culture today is due to the rejection of governing values, and a general acceptance of nihilism and hedonism as a way of life. At this point, one might argue that this is purely a Western problem that does not affect an Algerian writer. It is, however, very naïve to pretend that Western culture does not exert a continual influence on the rest of the world. Media in particular is a strong brainwashing medium. It is undeniable that our cultures (Arab, African, Muslim) are in danger of undermining their highest principles. Although this disintegration is caused by many factors, the influence of the West, especially the USA (because of their dominant culture) plays a big part. To expose the nihilism that plagues American culture is to prevent its propagation in ours, since understanding the causes of a problem is the first step towards finding its cure.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the social and personal effects of the general mood of confusion and existential void that follows the abandonment of traditional values. It also shows how different people try to fend off (or succumb to)

the feeling of nihilism that quickly settles in when life provides no meaning. Nihilism here broadly means the rejection, either deliberate or imposed, of all governing systems, and the belief that all predetermined values are either invalid or relative. Naturally, this forces individuals to face the insignificance of their lives, and pushes them to find reasons to continue living since, without a purpose, even suicide is not a viable solution and is as meaningless as life itself. Through the study of three novels published in three different decades (1980s, 1990s, 2000s), we follow the experiences of individuals afflicted by the pervasive nihilism characteristic of their cultural context. In these works, we witness the identity disintegration of a professor who bathes in lies and inauthenticity to calm his fear of death, a young man suffering from a masculinity crisis and unable to find a purpose for his life, and a father forced to raise his son in a postapocalyptic south devoid of morality. The three novels and the philosophical discussion they introduce allow this thesis to propose a detailed overview of the issue of postmodern nihilism, as well as the different attitudes people have towards it. By focusing on the characters' experiences, this study attempts to provide answers to the following questions: What are the social and cultural causes for the rejection of governing values? How does living without a higher purpose affect people's life? Does capitalism and consumerism exacerbate the feeling of alienation and meaninglessness? How does the media contribute to the loss of certainty and objective truth? How do psychological insecurities and inadequacies contribute to the creation of unhealthy and often self-destructive coping mechanisms? Can individuals retrieve a sense of spirituality in a society that deems it archaic? Is the

return to the old ways the only solution to regain a sense of purpose? Can one create his own higher ideals to generate a sense of order and direction?

The novels chosen as case studies are Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). The fact that these works were published by the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty first century is a deliberate choice since, I argue, this era was characterized by a general surrender to nihilism in American culture. The loss of values is by no means a new phenomenon, and related questions such as the absence of an intrinsic meaning to life have been discussed in many books that can be traced back to antiquity. In American literature, the reemergence of nihilistic thinking also started early in the twentieth century. The post World War II literary scene knew many names like Kurt Vonnegut and John Barth who, influenced by the European existentialists, started deconstructing their culture and questioning the values that founded their civilization. However, their times were still governed by a feeling of optimism towards the future. Also, ideals such as nationalism, traditional family structure and religion were still alive. Starting from the 1980s, the "American Dream" was already fractured. Post-1945 euphoria died out after the atrocities of the Vietnam War, capitalism destroyed the financial security that the baby-boomer³ generation knew, and the failure of counterculture movements such as the hippies⁴ exacerbated the feeling of helplessness in the face of a dying culture. Finally, through the 1990s and

³ In the US, Individuals born between 1946 and 1964. Their time was characterized by economic stability and a mood of optimism towards the future that resulted in high birth rates, hence the name "baby-boomers".

⁴ A counterculture and anti-establishment movement that started in the US around the mid 1960's. They rejected mainstream culture and adopted a bohemian lifestyle characterized by self-expression, mysticism (often attained through drug use) and non-violence.

2000s, the incessant bombardment of media, entertainment and advertisement created hordes of mindless consumers unable to break free from their existential void. For these reasons, the choice of the epoch was necessary to highlight “the suffering, defeatism and pain attributable to late capitalism and postmodernity that is, for many throughout these narratives, endemic within society and culture at the turn of the millennium” (Bull 149).

Considering the selection of novels, the decision was made on the basis that each one explores a different aspect of nihilism and features protagonists who respond to their crisis of values in a variety of ways. Although they all tackle the existential emptiness and moral ambiguity of late capitalism, each work focuses on a different symptom. Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* sheds the light on the loss of objective truth⁵ caused by an overreliance on mass media and technology. Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* bemoans the purposelessness of a generation brought up in dysfunctional families and spiritual starvation. Finally, McCarthy’s *The Road* places its characters in a world where the selfish need for survival destroyed all remnants of morality. When reading the three novels collectively, one can develop a clearer and more complete grasp of the effects of living without governing values. At the same time, they offer an understanding of how different individuals respond to the threat of nihilism. While DeLillo’s Jack Gladney accepts his insignificance and aggravates his inauthenticity by wearing a disguise and hiding in crowds, Palahniuk’s unnamed protagonist uses his alter-ego, Tyler Durden, to stage a violent rebellion against his culture and society

⁵ The sense of certainty and the idea that there are undeniable facts about the world independent of individual beliefs, conventions, attitudes, and social practices. Postmodernist thinkers such as Michel Foucault denied its existence and claimed that, for instance, Truth depends on power and “each society has its own regime of truth” (Moberger).

that culminates in the creation of an extremist group vowed to destroy civilization (although, as we will see, the whole project might have unfolded only in the protagonist's imagination). McCarthy's survivalist father and son, on the other hand, decide to invoke more primitive forces to cling to morality. The father elevates his child to a state of divinity and the pair creates a mythical mission of "carrying the fire" to force a sense of meaning onto their doomed existence. The three approaches of coping with the lack of governing values complete our study by adding a psychological dimension to the question of nihilism.

Many critics have judged these novels as indicative of a larger cultural problem. The main characters in particular are seen as case studies for understanding the aimlessness that many people feel today. Most importantly, they locate the root of the problem in the loss of old convictions and principles made relative and unreliable in the postmodern era. Unfortunately, the novels are generally studied separately. In most cases, only one symptom of nihilism is examined, and the loss of only one governing value is seen as its cause. This is the point at which this thesis becomes relevant. It attempts to combine seemingly unrelated works to draw a complete picture of today's crisis. While the quoted critics focus on one aspect of nihilism at a time, this thesis merges their opinions to have a fuller understanding of the issue. This means that each novel analysis (and each chapter) relies on a different set of writers.

When dealing with Don DeLillo's *White Noise* for instance, most discussions veer towards the loss of truth caused by mass media, and the loss of human sanctity precipitated by technology and atheism. John N. Duvall's *The Cambridge Companion of Don DeLillo* (2008) compiles articles of many writers who offer a detailed

examination of the issue. In *White Noise*, Stacey Olster diagnoses Jack Gladney's alienation as symptomatic of his time. She explains the role of television and mass media in distorting reality. The anesthetization of events and the overreliance on the screen presented truth as illusive and thus unreliable, plunging the characters of the novel into a perpetual state of uncertainty. Olster also views the protagonist as stuck in a by-gone era and motivated by "nostalgic longings" (81). He tries to apply modernist, spiritual or romantic explanations to events but is met with silence. This fact is very important because, generally, nihilism starts when meaning is sought but not found. Ruth Helyer adds another dimension to the protagonist's alienation. In *DeLillo and masculinity* (2008), she explains how technology had reduced human life to a series of calculations and scientific observations. This superficial view on humanity devalued further the meaning of life (and death). Helyer also explores the fall of wisdom and how the family and the university fail to provide guidance and allow individuals to seek the comfort of ignorance. The edition of *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretation* (2003) dedicated to DeLillo's *White Noise* also offer a plethora of critics who expand on the problem. Tom LeClair and Leonard Wilcox, for instance, deal with the protagonist's failed attempts to counter his existential void and acute fear of death. In *Closing the Loop: White Noise*, LeClair exposes Gladney's attempt to compensate his insignificance by over-consumerism. The hoarding of commodities only suffocates him once the rush of shopping dies out. LeClair also explains the abandonment of individuality, and the reliance on guiding figures symbolized by the protagonist's mental "slavery" to his friend Murray. Leonard Wilcox exposes the impossibility of heroism in postmodern fiction by studying Gladney's ultimate

attempt to regain meaning. In *Baudrillard, DeLillo's White Noise, and the End of Heroic Narrative*, Wilcox follows the protagonist's vengeful journey that ends with an anticlimactic realization of his weakness. Fantasies of violence are impotent ways of retrieving values and they reveal the powerlessness of the postmodern man. Along with LeClair and Wilcox, many critics depict the protagonist as a Nietzschean "Last Man"⁶, a demoralized conformist, unable to fully individuate and too attached to comfort and security. As explained earlier, discussions of DeLillo's *White Noise* tend to focus on only a few aspects of nihilism. They explore the loss of objective truth and wisdom, and they expose the weakness of the discouraged nihilist who seeks to hide his angst in crowds and consumerism. That is why, a study of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* can expand our understanding of the matter by offering different reasons and consequences to nihilism.

Fight Club starts with an equally alienated character crushed by the weight of his society. Themes of consumerism and media are discussed in the articles presented in *Bloomsbury Studies in Contemporary North American Fiction: Chuck Palahniuk: Fight Club, Invisible Monsters, Choke* (2013). For instance, in *The Avatars of Masculinity: How Not to Be a Man*, Eduardo Mendieta exposes the protagonist's addiction to commodities and media images. Indeed, the main character's whole perception of masculinity is based on enhanced TV images and his main means of gaining self-worth is hoarding expensive IKEA furniture. Mendieta clearly blames the purposelessness of the protagonist on society, which is different from James R. Giles who offers a more psychological approach. In *Violence, Spaces, and a Fragmenting*

⁶ "Letzter Man": First introduced in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885). He is the antithesis of Nietzsche's ideals of strength and individuality.

Consciousness in Fight Club, Giles argues that the resentment built up in the protagonist's mind was caused by unattained personal values, namely human connection and spirituality. For instance, the absence of a father figure created a "long-repressed anger" (24) that eventually turned into violence and self-destruction. Loneliness is omnipresent in the protagonist's life prompting him to seek connection in support groups for terminally-ill patients. Giles also draws parallels between the absence of a father and the absence of God, explaining that they both represent the confusion caused by the loss of an all-knowing and all-caring figure. The social nihilism presented in *Fight Club* starts with the abandonment of connection caused by dysfunctional families and an increasingly individualistic culture. These concepts are developed in Laurie Vickroy's *Body Contact: Acting Out is the Best Defense in Fight Club* (2013). For Vickroy, much of the protagonist's time is spent escaping his need for emotional connection. The creation of an alter ego, fight clubs and vandalism cults were ways to contend with his loneliness because certain "emotional pains" cannot be confronted alone (75). Vickroy proves that love, as a form of connection, was offered to the protagonist from the start, and his relationship with Marla Singer could have been the solution for much of his troubles. In the articles above, one can clearly see that the devaluation of family, love and community (and the spirituality linked to it) is a catalyst for postmodern men's descent into nihilism. Naturally, the protagonist's (or rather his alter ego's) aim to destroy modern society had motives beyond mere loneliness. Peter Mathews' *Diagnosing Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club* published in *The International Journal of Existential Literature* (2005) explores the psychology behind the protagonist's violent rebellion against life. Besides explaining the roots of

the problem, namely loneliness, capitalism and spiritual emptiness (89), Mathews explains the dangers of “active” nihilism, comparing some elements of the novel to fascist ideals (69). He also emphasizes the fact that the protagonist’s dreams of destruction drew him away from the values he needed and failed to cure his alienation. In brief, the research on Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* focuses mostly on the loss of community, individuality and purpose and depict the violent “revolution” against life as an ineffectual escape mechanism rather than a real solution.

Both community and spirituality are discussed when dealing with Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. However, rather than their effects on the individual, they are considered to have an impact on one of the most important interpersonal values threatened by nihilism: morality. Indeed, the whole novel appears to be an experiment to test humanity’s ability to maintain a sense of good in a world governed by ethical nihilism⁷. Steven Frye, in his book *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* (2009), asserts that morality is a common theme in McCarthy’s works. In *The Road* in particular, this theme is hyperbolized by the narrative trope of the apocalypse which places individuals in a situation where being good is no longer necessary nor enforced by any governing system. Frye also alludes to the concept of the Übermensch⁸ which is essential to understanding *The Road*. The protagonists nurture a stubborn sense of personal values akin to the Nietzschean idea of “overcoming” and antithetical to their reality. With this analysis, we discover a third possible way of dealing with existential emptiness, which is the proclamation of a personal set of values. McCarthy’s novel is

⁷ Also referred to as “Moral Nihilism”, the idea that no action can be objectively considered morally right or wrong. Moral statements are fundamentally meaningless and have no solid basis because they are subjective or socially constructed.

⁸ Nietzsche’s “Overman” (or Superman): The ideal of the self-accomplished, assertive individual with a “master morality” who rises above the conformist lifestyle of the masses (or the herd).

not a moralizing and optimistic piece of writing. The characters are still stuck in a postapocalyptic world that is deeply nihilistic, selfish and meaningless. This exaggeration is merely a reflection of the author's reality as can be understood from Stephen Joyce's *The Double Death of Humanity in Cormac McCarthy's The Road* (2016) which explains the role of the apocalyptic narrative in interpreting real life phenomena. Lydia Cooper, in *Cormac McCarthy A complexity theory of literature* (2021) explains the roots of the abandonment of morality. "Othering", hyper-individualism and "the fear of others" (148) are all consequences of the frantic lifestyle in late capitalist America. Similarly, today's culture of consumerism creates the compulsion to crush others over resources, an idea echoed by Jordan J. Dominy who, in *Cannibalism, Consumerism, and Profanation: Cormac McCarthy's The Road and the End of Capitalism* (2015), views cannibalism as a metaphor for over-consumerism. Both Cooper and Dominy develop the idea of refusing cannibalism as the first step of regaining a sense of good and detaching from the herd. Lydia Cooper emphasizes the idea that a healthy sense of community (both in family and groups of strangers) can end the cycle of ethical nihilism.

A diverse range of scholarly literature will be utilized to study the three novels, and apart from a few exceptions, each novel will require a different set of critics. However, this work will be arranged so that it follows a logical thread that explains a social and philosophical problem that goes beyond the literary analysis of fictional works. As a whole, the study of the novels will be based on the following hypothesis: The alienation, confusion and purposelessness experienced by the characters of the three novels stem from the abandonment of traditional values. The

culture and social milieu in which they live contribute to the disintegration of meaning and the propagation of nihilism. Without meaningful ideals, these characters develop fragmented personalities and pathological behaviors (extreme fear of death, outburst of violence...) that can only be subdued through temporary coping mechanisms. It is only through an active search to restore a sense of values (either preconceived or self-created) that these characters can justify their suffering and repel the lingering nihilism that haunts their world.

To understand the rise of nihilism in contemporary American literature, this thesis adopts a qualitative approach aimed at explaining the causes and mechanisms behind this phenomenon through a theoretical analysis of selected novels as case studies. By examining the main characters, it seeks to develop a deeper understanding of human behavior, particularly the emergence and management of feelings of existential absurdity. Questions about the meaning of life and existential angst require knowledge of philosophy, while the personality disorders suffered by some characters require psychological interpretations. Addressing this topic invites exploration of various philosophical concepts before delving into the novels themselves. It would therefore be advantageous for this work to establish a theoretical basis in an introductory theoretical chapter.

Chapter One introduces nihilism and the Nietzschean vision of the natural disintegration of Western values. It also establishes the link between philosophy and literature in this regard. It starts with a definition of the key ideas associated with nihilism, as well as its major types that manifested at different points in history. This is done with the aim of facilitating the analysis of the selected novels without the need

to interrupt the literary criticism with philosophical definitions. The first chapter also clarifies some common misconceptions such as the idea that nihilism is nothing but a rejection of all belief. In reality it is a fully-formed doctrine that provides both an analysis of, and some remedies to, a real crisis in Western thought. For instance, Nietzsche is often perceived as an advocate of nihilism while he saw it as a sickness that must be overcome with a strong and defiant proclamation of individual values. Nietzsche is not the only philosopher to be examined in this chapter; all the definitions presented herein will draw on the work of prominent thinkers from the Enlightenment to postmodernism. For example, the arguments on the rejection of authority in search of individuality are supported by Immanuel Kant's *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment* (1784), and the idea of the loss of objective truth in an era of simulacra (mediated inauthentic representations of reality) is explained through Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). Nietzsche remains the central figure discussed in this thesis, particularly through his *The Will to Power* (1901). He did not only write extensively on nihilism, but also predicted the subsequent deterioration of Western ideals and the emergence of the "Last Man", a discouraged and purposeless individual "who lives a quiet life of comfort, without thought for individuality or personal growth" (Hendricks). This description alone helps us understand the motives of the protagonists of the first two novels.

The second part of Chapter One moves from philosophy to literature as it tries to explore the reemergence of existential concerns in postmodernism, and how authors of the era recuperated those ideas in an attempt to interpret the growing nihilism of their culture. Relying primarily on works such as Will Slocombe's thesis-

turned-book *Postmodern Nihilism: Theory and Literature* (2006), and Ashley Woodward's *Nihilism in Postmodernity: Lyotard, Baudrillard, Vattimo* (2009), this part focuses on the loss of the feeling of certainty, the meaning of life, and morality in American late-capitalist society. These concerns constitute some of the major themes discussed in the selected novels. Once all theoretical concepts are clarified, the thesis takes on a more literary dimension. Each of the remaining chapters studies one of the selected works, focusing on one type of nihilism and examining the psyche of tormented characters with different and unique attitudes towards their crisis of values.

Chapter Two covers Epistemological nihilism⁹ and the impossibility of objective truth in a society hijacked by mass media and excessive consumerism. In Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, we follow the bewildering experiences of Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler studies with an acute fear of death, who tries in vain to find meaning to his purposeless existence. In DeLillo's cosmos, characters are unable to experience life without having their perception distorted by the mediated images of television. Moreover, science has proclaimed itself a new deity, but instead of providing people with a sense of assurance, it exacerbated their confusion with contradicting and ever-changing information. Jack Gladney is painfully aware of the contradictions of his society and its severe lack of spirituality. Yet, he is unable to escape his reality and finds himself torn between his modernist impulses of finding meaning, and his postmodernist compulsion to embrace inauthenticity and to drown his fears in consumerism and herd-like conformity. *White Noise*'s protagonist offers a

⁹ The belief that knowledge is impossible because truth is uncertain, subjective or even fundamentally "unknowable". One can think but never "know". Belief is possible but "knowing is a non-existent state" (McGinn).

well-painted portrait of Nietzsche's "Last Man". In this chapter, we will explore how television and mass media devaluated the concept of truth, how science robbed existence of its sanctity and how consumerism reduced life to a race to accumulate possessions. Through an analysis of the protagonist, we will also discover a common response to nihilism governed by fear and alienation.

Chapter Three develops further the issue of life's meaninglessness and questions the place of men in a society that renders them expendable. Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* introduces a purposeless and utterly nihilistic protagonist, plagued by a crisis of masculinity and a painful lack of spirituality that he links to his fatherless childhood. Unlike DeLillo's Jack Gladney, *Fight Club*'s protagonist does not have a family to shelter him or a meaningful job to preoccupy him. Also, instead of seeking to reestablish meaning, he descends into a spiral of destruction that detaches him further from his sense of self, and creates a dissociative identity disorder. The protagonist's neurosis engenders an alter ego named Tyler Durden who represents his repressed desires of chaos and quenches his need for a guiding figure. With Tyler, he fills his existential void with a crescendo of violence, self-mutilation and acts of vandalism. Evidently, *Fight Club* explores the ideology of a different type of postmodern men who embrace nihilism as a desperate way to regain their self-worth. It is noteworthy to say that the author knew this attitude too well because "Palahniuk's interviews sometimes resemble Durden's aphorisms, and his nonfiction has explored personal experience with steroids, the occult, physical abuse, and the circumstances surrounding his father's extraordinary murder." (Kavadlo 12). For this reason, the novel offers a detailed account of the inner workings of an isolated soul

deprived of the guidance of governing principles. The third chapter attempts to make sense of the protagonist's destructive tendencies and locates his existential angst in a society that transforms individuals into isolated and hollow consumers.

Chapter Four deals with ethical nihilism in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, a postapocalyptic tale that thrusts its characters into a ruined America. The novel challenges our notions of good versus evil and tests the ability of its characters to maintain a sense of morality in an evil world. In the previous chapter, Palahniuk's fragmented antihero wished for the destruction of civilization, believing that rising from the ashes would build a society based on the right values. In McCarthy's *The Road*, this hypothesis is put to the test but the decay of corporate monopoly and consumerism does not produce a purposeful existence based on community as Tyler Durden had imagined. Instead, the fight over the dwindling resources sinks humanity into a more violent individualism whereby all values are destroyed in the name of survival. McCarthy's deeply philosophical novel raises two important questions: are human beings inherently immoral? And can individuals build their own values without a governing system to guide their actions?

The Road follows the journey of a father and son in a wasteland of burning forests and suffocating ash. They fight starvation, the impending cold that prompted their exodus, and the roaming gangs of cannibals that inhabit their hostile world. Above all, they fight to find a meaning to their need for survival and a reason to maintain a sense of goodness in the midst of complete nihilism. As for the protagonist's active search for meaning, it represents the third type of response towards the crisis of values. It depicts the naïve yet strong-minded idea of living for a

purpose, and the Nietzschean ability to construct a personal sense of good that contradicts the dominant mindset. McCarthy also discusses the redeeming powers of spirituality and family. Despite the bleak tone of the novel and its bitter-sweet ending, the protagonists' attitude allows the final chapter to end on a more positive note that presents humanity as ailing yet capable of restoring its highest ideals.

Through a theoretical exploration of nihilism in both philosophy and literature, and a study of three postmodern novels with characters in a desperate search for meaning, this thesis sheds the light on the loss of traditional values that preoccupies many American authors at the turn of the century. It explains the decay of sacred concepts and the gradual loss of purpose prompted by comfort and consumerism. Guided by DeLillo, Palahniuk and McCarthy, we will dive into the psyche of alienated characters who adopt different methods to restore order in chaos and combat the growing nihilism of their world.

CHAPTER ONE:

The Nihilistic Decay of Traditional Values: From philosophy to Literature

CHAPTER ONE

The Nihilistic Decay of Traditional Values from Philosophy to Literature

1.1. Introduction

The western world has reached, with the birth of postmodernism and the reawakening of the nihilist sentiment, an era of unprecedented moral ambiguity. The Second World War, the rise of consumerism and a plethora of other factors that will be discussed in this chapter, have shaken into combustion the values of the old world, leaving in their wake an ontological, moral and social vacuum. It is in the absence of solid norms that the new American nihilism thrived, leading the individual into two distinct paths: a passive acceptance of his existential crisis, or an active, sometimes violent, rebellion against the status-quo in the hope of establishing new subjective values. The books that will be discussed in this thesis explore the predicaments of the postmodern person, “a dehumanized conformist, alienated, indifferent, and baffled, directing psychological energy into hedonistic narcissism or into deep resentment that often explodes into violence” (Pratt). The focus of this thesis will be on understanding how this new nihilism contributed to the decay of traditional values in contemporary American culture.

The loss of values is by no means limited to morality. The very idea of what constitutes truth for example has been subverted by the concept of subjectivity. Truth could no longer be a value since the new consensus argues that life is all personal experience and it is up to the individual to believe his own reality. This undoubtedly leads to confusion, and one of the more topical examples is the discussion over gender identity. In June 2022, the American political commentator Matt Walsh produced a documentary intitled *What is a Woman?* in which he attempts to answer the formerly-redundant question of what constitutes a man and a woman, concepts in which the line has been blurred in his country. This example is not meant to embark on the “culture war” over gender identity but to prove that even the most fundamental notions are being questioned. Evidently, the deconstruction of all preconceived ideas exists mainly in the west. This is not astonishing since the loss of objective values finds its roots in nihilism, and nihilism is primarily a western phenomenon. Truth as an absolute, for example, was refuted by European thinkers such as the German philosopher Max Stirner who wrote: “All Truth by itself is dead, a corpse: it is alive only in the same way my lungs are alive, namely in the measure of my own vitality. Truths are material like vegetables and weed; as to whether vegetables or weed, the decision lies in me” (qtd. in Slocombe 20).

The postmodern age is all too evidently, to borrow Nietzsche’s phrase, beyond good and evil. Morality, especially in the traditional religious sense has been subsided and sometimes annihilated by the hedonistic pursuits of consumerist culture. Will Slocombe explains that “Postmodernism, to many, indicates the widespread decay of western, primarily Christian standards” (Slocombe 140). Christianity in particular,

being for centuries the principal arbiter of moral conduct in the western world, has been subjected to “a secular inquisition” that urged some Christian writers, such as Walker Percy, to write moralizing novels intended to defend his faith from the advance of what he calls “*scientism*”; an over idealization of scientific reasoning that leaves no room for religious “*illusions*” (Bull 51).

Such description of life without a value structure might appear as an exaggerated dramatization of an intellectual current, but what it aims to demonstrate is how prescient this crisis is in contemporary American culture and how this tendency to discard or replace dominant values is the *modus operandi* of nihilism. Rachid M’Rabty explains: “When meaning and order are considered lamentable and contestable paradigms in the contemporary world, nihilism provides a means through which to critique the status quo and articulate a desired response or release” (M’Rabty 05).

Despite the fact that this issue is a social problem rooted in philosophy, literature seems to provide a deeper and more straightforward way of tackling it. Although relying heavily on philosophical concepts, this thesis focuses primarily on the interpretation of literary texts, and posits the proposition that writers offer a clearer understanding of such crisis. It somehow follows the idea of another thinker associated with nihilism, Martin Heidegger, who sees poetry as a way of comprehending Being (Bull 60). American writers in particular inject their novels with philosophical ideas that reveal their concern to deal with current issues and

elevate their works beyond mere entertainment. They have a “Russian”¹ tendency to use their works as vehicles for their philosophical thoughts.

Before diving into the realm of postmodern American fiction, however, the theories in which their themes are rooted must be explored. This requires a brief study of nihilism as a philosophical current and its role in the loss of traditional values. This chapter will be dedicated to exploring this doctrine, its origins, development and its place in contemporary American culture. This will clear the way for the next three chapters to discuss freely the current values crisis in the selected case studies without pausing to explain ambiguous concepts. Since the very word “nihilism” is shrouded with misconceptions, the first step is to provide a clear definition.

1.2. Introduction to Nihilism

It is a common misconception to view nihilism as nothing more than a rejection of all preestablished beliefs. This notion, though not entirely false, strips the doctrine from many of its core ideas for, as Slocombe notes, “there is much more to nihilism than mere “rage against being” or “the destruction of being”” (Slocombe 01). It is also important to note that not all nihilist thinkers marched under the same banner. In reality, many of them held different, if not entirely antithetical beliefs. Martin Heidegger for example saw the absence of objective values that the doctrine advocates as “the normal state of man” (Pratt), and that one must fully accept this fact of life. Friedrich Nietzsche on the other hand, saw the advent of nihilism as a disease

¹ Referring to the tendency of 18th century Russian writers such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky to write philosophical, moralizing or reformist works.

that must be overcome. He argued that, instead of falling into a passive acceptance of the loss of meaning, one must actively create his own ideals. Indeed, “Nietzsche perceived nihilism to be primarily a sickness -ambiguous in that it weakens, but it can also make strong when it is overcome- and thus nihilism became something to be overcome” (Slocombe 27).

Whether a problem to be surmounted or a reality to be accepted, the core of nihilism remains the same: that all existing values are nothing but social constructs rendered obsolete by enlightenment, and that, since truth cannot be known, they are all to be rejected. Nihilism is defined in the Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy as “the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated” (Pratt). Man must therefore break the shackles of social, religious and political norms that kept him in what Emanuel Kant called “self-inflicted immaturity”². Perhaps the best definition of what a nihilist is, at least in the positive sense, is found in one of the first works of fiction associated with the movement, Ivan Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* (1862). For Turgenev, a true nihilist is he “who does not bow down before any authority, who does not take any principle on faith, whatever reverence that principle may be enshrined in” (Turgenev 29).

This philosophy was initially met with suspicion, if not outright opposition. The very word “nihilism” was not coined by the advocates of the doctrine but its detractors who viewed the complete abandonment of pre-existing norms as synonymous with the belief in the “nihil” (nothingness). Deserting faith in favour of

² Unmündigkeit: the tendency of delegating one’s judgement and decision-making to power figures such as the state or the clergy. It is described in Kant’s 1784 essay *What is Enlightenment?*

empirical rationality in particular, was in stark contradiction with the Christian beliefs that predominated Europe. For instance, the German philosopher Friedrich Jacobi, who advocated the concept of “Glaube” (faith or belief) over reason, wrote: “all rationalist doctrines necessarily lead to nihilism: and nothing is more natural and logical than those who separate themselves from God should end in nothing, since beyond God there is nothing” (qtd. In Slocombe 18).

Despite this initial hostility towards it, nihilism continued to grow in popularity until it became an indivisible part of western thought. Questions over the meaning of life and its potential futility for example are still at the centre of contemporary philosophical debates. Walter Veit, from the University of Sydney, calls Existential nihilism (a branch that will be discussed in details in this chapter) “the only really serious philosophical problem” (Veit 211). As a matter of fact, most great thinkers had to face, at some point or another, the questions raised by nihilism. Charles Glicksburg notes: “from Sophocles and Lucretius to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy, there is scarcely an important creative figure who has not at some time been stricken with the fever of nihilism. It is always there to be overcome” (qtd. in Bull 03). He also mentions some thinkers, like the Greek tragedian Sophocles, although they lived and wrote well before the emergence of the doctrinal nihilism. There is no doubt, however, that he detected in their works the same concerns later formulated by Nietzsche or Sartre. This proves that nihilism had its origins long before the Age of Enlightenment, even though it took its full form in the 18th century.

It is difficult to determine exactly where nihilism found its roots, and since this thesis aims to focus on the decay of values in the contemporary world, the history of the doctrine will not be explored. However, it is interesting to note that its concerns can be traced all the way back to the ancient Greeks such as the Sceptics who offered some ideas akin to modern day existentialism. Empedocles, for example, observed that “the life of mortals is so mean a thing as to be virtually un-life” (Pratt). In the literature of the renaissance too, one can easily spot statements that resemble those championed by the nihilists. In his famous *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (1599-1601), William Shakespeare gave the prince the following sentence: “there is nothing good or bad but thinking make it so” (Shakespeare 75). Such reasoning is almost prophetic in the sense that it presents a statement that will only be accepted with the widespread of nihilism, namely the idea that all values, including the concepts of good and evil, are not rigid commandments bestowed by God but malleable constructs depending on individual judgement.

Despite all these examples, it is safe to say that the focus on reason and individuality in lieu of faith and community brought by the 17th and 18th century European Enlightenment is the main catalyser of nihilism. It is not that the focus on the intellect advocated the abandonment of values but that the process of thinking and questioning everything ultimately led to discrediting all past beliefs, starting with Christianity. It is because “once set in motion, the process of questioning could come to but one end, the erosion of conviction and certitude and collapse into despair” (Crosby 02). Nihilism is then an indirect result of the Enlightenment and its overreliance on rationality.

Among the many philosophers who advocated this new intellectual “maturity”, Friedrich Nietzsche was one of the most well-known examples. He was far from being the first to discuss the problem but, as Albert Camus puts it, with Nietzsche, “nihilism becomes conscious for the first time” (qtd. in Woodward 30). From *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883) to *The Will to Power* (notes collected and published posthumously by his sister in 1901), his writings offer us the most comprehensive analysis of the doctrine as well as the proposed ways of overcoming it. Indeed, contrary to popular belief, Nietzsche did not offer a life-negating pessimistic outlook on life, but preached an empowering approach to facing life’s presumed futility. Because he spilled so much ink on the subject, this thesis, while quoting other thinkers, will rely primarily on Nietzschean sources when discussing the types of nihilism and their role in the devaluation of values.

It is necessary to point out that Nietzsche’s initial aim was not to spread an ideology of rejection. Instead, he saw it as an inevitable phenomenon that would overwhelm western thought. He made a prediction based on his observation of the direction that intellectualism was taking. He wrote: “what I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently; the advent of nihilism” (Nietzsche 03).

Nietzsche then acted like a prophet, much like his Zarathustra, to warn his people against the fall of their old idols and to urge them to erect their own system of values lest they fall into despair. As seen earlier, Nietzsche viewed nihilism as a disease but it does not mean that he approved of the old ways. For instance, he saw Christianity as a limiting ideal that preached weakness. Change is a human necessity

and the the fragility of the old world offered a chance of finding a new, “higher” way of leading one’s life. Nietzsche clarified his opinion saying: “the world might be far more valuable than we used to believe; we must see through the naiveté of our ideals, and while we thought that we accorded it the highest interpretation, we may not even have given our human existence a moderately fair value” (22). This optimistic call for hope might seem contradictory to the popular understanding of nihilism which is generally seen as a pessimistic rejection of life. However, even Nietzsche knew that very few people were strong enough to see beyond despair and actively seek a renewed faith in existence. He understood that the “masses” would automatically fall into a passive acceptance of their new fragile position in the universe. This led to distinguishing between two responses to nihilism: Überwindung and Verwindung.

Überwindung means overcoming. It is the response of the bold; one who, in the face of despair, decides to rise above his circumstances and establish new ideals that correspond to his own personal truth. This response, though rare, was the core of Nietzsche’s teaching because it epitomizes the value that obsessed him, strength. He wrote: “I teach No to all that makes weak- that exhausts. I teach Yes to all that strengthens, that stores up strength, that justifies the feeling of strength” (33). Such attitude is explained in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as the quality of the “Superior Man” (Übermensch), standing as a shepherd among the ordinary masses described as “the herd”.

Verwindung means resignation, a passive acceptance of the meaninglessness of life. While the first response is reserved to the superior man, this attitude is associated with what Nietzsche calls “Last Man”; an unmotivated, weak being,

engrossed in routine and hedonistic pleasures and apprehensive of the pain and hardship associated with higher goals and risk-taking. For Nietzsche, this was the direction in which western society was heading, and there is no doubt that the presence of the “last man” can easily be seen in today’s culture, since he matches the description of the postmodern American nihilist as seen at the beginning of this chapter.

It is easy to assume that *Verwindung* is the only “wrong” response to nihilism, since Nietzsche idealized the *Übermensch* to a state of a secular messiah. Yet, both attitudes can lead to disastrous effects. On one side, the “last man” creates a society of sheepishly conformist and indifferent individuals akin to T.S Eliot’s *Hollow Men*. On the other side, the overzealous desire to instill one’s own will, as advocated by *Überwindung* can also lead to destruction because “Nihilism does not only contemplate the “in vain!” nor is it merely the belief that everything deserves to perish: one helps to destroy” (Nietzsche 18). It is this call for radical action that laid the foundation for the politically-centered Russian Nihilists during their revolution. Worse yet, as the German philosopher Theodor Adorno explained, “Overcomings, even those of nihilism along with the Nietzschean kind, who meant it otherwise and yet delivered slogans to Fascism, are at all times worse than what is overcome” (228).

Seeing nihilism as an all-encompassing philosophy of rejection can still be difficult to understand. Dissecting it to smaller parts, representing the different ideas it posits can make it easier to digest. It would also create a good basis for understanding how these different philosophical propositions led to the decline of higher values such as morality and the sacredness of life.

1.3. Types of Nihilism:

1.3.1. Epistemological Nihilism

Perhaps the very basis of nihilism's rejection of values lies in the belief that nothing can be known and that truth can never be fully grasped. Human perception, being limited, is incapable of producing any objective thought with certainty. Values, being the product of such defective perception, have no solid foundation and must then be subjected to reevaluation and even outright rejection. This concept is referred to as Epistemological nihilism and it can be traced back to the Greek sceptics. Aristocles for example wrote: "neither our perception nor our judgement teach us to know truth or untruth. Therefore, we must not trust either our sense or our reason, but must remain without opinion, unmoved, inclining neither to one side or the other" (qtd. in Slocombe 12). In literature, examples of this passive mistrust in one's own ability to discern right from wrong was revived in the works of many 20th century existentialists. Albert Camus's *Meursault* displayed the same detached immovability in *L'étranger* (1942) and John Barth's *Todd Andrews* refused to build or express a fixed opinion on anything (even his decision to end his life changed at the end of the novel) throughout *The Floating Opera* (1956). The idea of the impossibility of truth originated in ancient Greece, was revived during the Enlightenment and flourished in postmodernism. This fact suggests that such rejection of certainty is closely related to the absence or loss of religion.

Western thought had been for centuries governed by Christianity. This latter dictated commandments assured to be the undeniable words of an all-knowing

creator. This, despite giving justification for the church's totalitarianism, provided people with a feeling of assurance. Even when knowledge was impossible, one can still have a "leap of faith" in the Kierkegaardian sense, and ego-driven personal judgement can be put aside. When religion started to be replaced by the idealization of reason, all certainty started to fade. That is why nihilism, as a cultural phenomenon can be said to begin with the democratization of atheism. The example of the Greek sceptics does not disapprove this observation either. Ancient paganism did not provide its devotees with a rigid interpretation of truth. Greek gods were all too human in their character, flawed and leaving to mortals the freedom to use their free will. There is no wonder that such period of history bore the pillars of philosophy still taught today. Even their literature featured instances of defiance that would be dismissed as blasphemous in Christian Europe. An example would be *Ulysses* confronting Poseidon and declaring himself independent from the Gods in Homer's *Odyssey*. It is only monotheism, more precisely the Judeo-Christian tradition that put absolute truth at the center of people's lives. It is logical then, after nearly eighteen centuries of a one-truth interpretation to feel at a loss when the sole source of certainty begins to be dismantled.

Epistemological nihilism produces a different effect depending on the strength of the individual as described in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The superior man may see this as an opportunity to impose his own beliefs which, in the absence of objective truth, have the same worth as any other doctrine. The weak, however, finding no shepherd to follow, falls into a state of despair. Slocombe explains: "the view that "nothing is real" can lead to either a magnificent furore of

being at the center of the universe...or to complete impotence in the face of an overwhelming nullity” (Slocombe 12). When the concept of “reality” is impossible to know, and the only source of absolute truth had been devalued, the very purpose of one’s existence is at risk. This inevitably leads to Existential nihilism because “Nietzsche believed that the removal of this system [Christianity] put most people at the risk of despair or meaninglessness. What could the point of life be without a God?” (Hendricks).

1.3.2. Existential Nihilism

Religion provided people with a sense of security, a feeling of importance and a place in the universe. In the Judeo-Christian conception of the world, man is God’s favored creation, made after His own image. The circle of life and death as well as suffering are justified by a passing on to a better world achieved by diligent worship and righteous deeds. Nietzsche notes that religion “granted man an absolute value, as opposed to his smallness and accidental occurrence in the flux of becoming and passing away” (09). The sudden realization of one’s “smallness” inevitably spirals into despair. It is not the lack of meaning in itself that creates nihilism. Buddhism for example, thought it teaches contentment and an unconditional appreciation of life, dictates that life is a cycle of suffering and rebirth devoid of intrinsic meaning. It is only by a transcendental detachment from desire that one can break this cycle and reach a state of Nirvana³. Nihilism occurs when one actively

³ In Buddhism, a state of perfect peace where all passions and sufferings are extinguished.

attempts to make sense out of a meaningless world and, when his quest is fruitless, falls into despair or resentment. It starts “when we have sought a “meaning” in all event that is not there: so the seeker becomes discouraged” (Nietzsche 12).

Existential nihilism could be defined as “the notion that life has no intrinsic meaning or value” (Pratt). The lack of meaning casts man into a position of aimlessness that generates further suffering. This idea of unjustified suffering has been at the center of existentialist thought. Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, believed that it constitutes the entirety of human experience. However, contrary to Nietzsche, He argued that it was impossible to surmount such state of perpetual hopelessness. Sartre wrote: “The being of human reality is suffering...human reality therefore is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state” (qtd. in Landau 04). It is this general pessimism towards life that separates existentialism from other theories of being.

The statement “life is suffering” for instance is by no means a product of nihilism. It is an ancient idea present in many philosophies, eastern and western alike. Professor Jordan B. Peterson, in his *Twelve Rules for Life*, a book dedicated to counter nihilism, confirmed this statement saying “all the ancients, from Buddha to biblical authors, knew what every slightly worn-out adult knows, that life is suffering” (10). This idea was then seen as an undeniable fact. Suffering, however, could be tolerated and even transformed into a source of meaning when subjected to the redeeming powers of ideals and governing values. Serving a deity, seeking knowledge, altruism, anything that gives people a sense of purpose can serve as an armor that keeps the dread of existentialism at bay. Yet, under nihilism, all these values are considered

baseless, stripping the individual from his sole source of solace. Ashley Woodward clarifies: “according to Nietzsche, human beings suffer more from meaninglessness of suffering than from suffering itself, and it is the inability to find meaning in suffering that gives rise to the first impulse to negate the values of life” (Woodward 32).

The purposelessness produced by existentialism makes one feel alienated from his own life. As Sartre put it, “nothingness reveals each individual as an isolated being, “thrown” into an alien and unresponsive universe” (Pratt). This “thrownness” or “Geworfenheit” as described by Martin Heidegger is what causes the detachment displayed by the characters of many existential novelists. These individuals are often haunted by thoughts of self-destruction or the impulse to cause destruction resulting from their feeling of “ressentiment” which is “the resentment against life that arises when a meaning is demanded for suffering and none is found” (Woodward 32). Both reactions can be seen in John Barth’s *The Floating Opera* (1956) in which the main character, Todd Andrews, faced by his own purposelessness, decides to emulate his father’s behavior and end his life. Later in the novel, we see him plan to destroy the showboat in which he and many of his townspeople were present. This violence against the self and against others exemplifies a common method of finding unusual ways of dealing with the fear of purposelessness. It is the very method that will be explained in detail in chapter three while discussing Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*. Rachid M’Rabty explains the nihilism-based destruction saying: “it is evident that the confrontation with the existential impasse motivates subjects to transgress, self-destruct or explore alternative and less optimistic routes of escape from the profound horror of existence” (M’Rabty 07).

At the end of *The Floating Opera*, Andrews decides to abandon his plans of self-destruction, not because of a sudden retrieval of hope, but because he realized that death was as meaningless as life. He makes a resolution that reads: “there’s no final reason for living (or for suicide)” (Barth 118). He justifies his position by saying, “The truth is that nothing makes any difference, including that truth, Hamlet’s question is, absolutely, meaningless” (82). Barth alludes here to Shakespeare’s famous line “*to be or not to be*”, which is also mentioned by Nietzsche. This latter, being a fervent advocator of strength, also dismissed the proposition but not because it was meaningless, but because it preached weakness. Nietzsche wrote: “the question whether not-to-be is better than to be is itself a disease, a sign of decline, an idiosyncrasy.” (24). Indeed, the philosopher opposed suicide and saw it as a form of cowardice. The proper response would be to overcome, not to succumb, “And suffering might predominate, and in spite of that, a powerful will might exist, a Yes to life, a need for this predominance” (Nietzsche 23). This radical affirmation of life is demanded of the *Übermensch* who must assert his will despite the allure of despair.

The absence of a clear socially or religiously-dictated meaning to existence does not exclude the possibility of finding one’s own. That is the main difference between 20th century existentialists who, undoubtedly influenced by the two World Wars, condemned humanity to perpetual suffering, and Friedrich Nietzsche who saw the world as a blank canvas on which man can draw his own path, “he offered us a way out: the creation of our own values as individuals; the creation of a meaning of life by those who live it” (Hendricks). The emphasis on “those who live it” comes in contrast with the belief that meaning comes from a divine source beyond this world,

an idea that was, for Nietzsche, a hurdle for personal growth. As a matter of fact, Nietzschean nihilism destroys all obstacles to individual supremacy. This involves dismantling traditional views on morality and moving beyond the concepts of good and evil. This form, commonly called ethical nihilism, is the third type that this thesis attempts to explore.

1.3.3. Ethical/Moral Nihilism

As we have already established, nihilism deemed all values baseless, and morality is no exception. The discrediting of Christianity which had been the main dictator of good conduct, contributed greatly to this crisis. That is because, in the absence of a divine judge, good deeds are unrewarded, and thus rendered useless for those who fail to act without external guidance. Acts of “evil”, on the other, if they can be useful on earth and go unpunished in the hereafter, lose their immoral quality. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who saw his art as a corrective medium, noticed how individuals tended to drift towards immorality when the weight of their actions is lessened by their lack of faith, “Dostoyevsky maintains that once God is renounced, nihilism must follow, because without the weight of divine sanction, values lose all effective force” (Bull 43).

This fact is supported by modern psychology in its study of basic human motivation. Our actions are dictated by two natural forces: avoiding pain and seeking pleasure. People are pushed into actions such as sustenance and sexual reproduction mostly because they procure some form of gratification. This culminates into the idea

of an absolute and eternal state of bliss; heaven. This divine reward injects believers with a great deal of motivation to be moral. On the other hand, most individuals avoid certain deeds out of fear of the pain that would ensue, and the greater the pain, the more they would refrain from it. Hell, therefore, as a place of eternal torment, produces enough fear to dissuade any believer from falling into “immorality”. When these two concepts are refuted as a result of atheism, the very idea of good and evil loses its significance. It is true that atheism is not synonymous with immorality, and the individual can still find secular pillars to guide one’s actions (such as the sense of duty, conscience...). Yet, in a western world still recovering from the loss of its religious identity, a moral crisis was almost inevitable. Nietzsche wrote: “one still hopes to get along with moralism without religious background; but that necessarily leads to nihilism” (Nietzsche 16).

In addition to the unavailability of objective truth and the dismantlement of religious authority, Nietzsche provided another reason to reject traditional morality. In his view, the moral codes that spread across the western world advocated weakness and were championed not by strong individuals such as Napoleon or Caesar, but by the weak and resentful masses that he called “the herd”. Here, he formulated his separation of the two forms of morality: “master morality” and “slave morality”. “Nietzsche also suggests that multiple moralities have existed at the same time, and that they reveal their adherents’ psychological perspective, which can be either healthy or sick. In particular, he suggests that master morality and slave morality are radically different in outlook” (Magnus & Higgins 65).

In the Nietzschean view of the cosmos, human beings are divided into two groups. The first category is that of the masters, a superior species of elite, strong-willed men (men is the proper word here because Nietzsche did not believe women to be capable of displaying such qualities) bearing the torch of enlightenment and progress. On the opposite end, we are confronted with the “herd”, common folks craving security through conformity and bound to corrupt the world with their weakness if they were to run amok. It is the widespread of the morality of the weak-willed masses that caused the decline of Europe, and it is the duty of the few “Superior Men” to reject such a morality and establish their own life-affirming rules. This reductive view of people reveals the elitist nature of most Nietzschean writings, and one can easily understand why many believed that this radical appeal to strength contributed, albeit unintentionally, to the establishment of fascist regimes, notably Nazism. Indeed, “his [Nietzsche’s] name was later invoked by Fascists and Nazis to advance the very things he loathed.” (Magnus & Higgins 01).

Despite the possible destructive nature of the “strong”, Nietzscheanism saw them as the only hope for humanity thanks to their ability to impose their aristocratic values and their strong will regardless of the risks, rather than retreating at the first sign of danger. What sets them apart is the fact that they are dangerous, possessing a primal strength and vigor that they willingly keep in check. Their “goodness” lies in their choice to avoid the evil that they are capable of inflicting. In other words, one can only be truly “good” if he holds within him the possibility of being “bad”. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche dismantles the common association between goodness and harmlessness saying: “I believe you capable of any evil: therefore I desire of you the

good. In truth, I have often laughed at the weaklings who think themselves good because their claws are blunt” (84). It is then a sign of weakness and not moral superiority to “turn the other cheek” in the Christian sense of the phrase, which explains further why nihilism revolted against religion. Even works that advocated the allegiance to moral duty such as Jordan Peterson’s *12 Rules for Life* discouraged the voluntary state of “Verwindung”. Peterson explains that being morally responsible “does not mean you must take the role of lap-dog, obedient and harmless. That’s how a dictator wants his slaves” (Peterson 81). The tendency to refuse confrontation leads to a repressed feeling of injustice and a resentment against circumstances. This comes in contrast with one of the most praised aspects of Nietzscheanism, “machtgefühl”, which is the feeling of strength and power that one derives from overcoming obstacles and asserting (or at least expressing) his will. Peterson continues by presenting an alternative to anyone who wishes to exert a “strong morality: “Dare, instead, to be dangerous” (81).

In literature, very few examples embody this form of Nietzschean morality. One novel series in particular stands out thanks to its main character, Dr. Hannibal Lecter. In Thomas Harris’s *Red Dragon* (1981), *Silence of the Lambs* (1988), *Hannibal* (1999), and *Hannibal rising* (2006), we encounter a dangerous serial killer who eats the flesh of his victims. The initial impression of Dr. Lecter might invoke fear and repulsiveness caused by witnessing “pure evil”. Yet, the more he is described, the more we see how he endeavors to restore justice in his own way. Being a licensed psychiatrist who dresses fashionably and reads magazines of *haute cuisine* separate him from the ordinary psychopath. Through his strength and fearlessness,

“Dr Hannibal Lecter undeniably shows striking similarity to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. He is a man who stood against normality. He detested ordinariness and was successful in leaving their signature in the minds of the people” (Soman & Basil 59). With his power to harm his enemies and charm his interlocutors, Lecter decides to exert his powers towards “good” (or at least his own definition of it). In the two first novels, while behind bars, he helps both detectives Will Graham and Clarice Sterling in their investigations, though through unusual methods. He later uses his ruthlessness as a form of punishment: “whenever it was ‘feasible’, he preferred to eat the rude” (Harris 99). This “dangerous” form of morality proves that “the noble connotations of the villain’s cruelty might actually represent humanity’s reparations for the damage of potentially life-denying Judeo-Christian morality” (Taylor 190). In other words, what makes this character truly Nietzschean is his assertion of his will through rebellion against the weakness-inducing Christian morality and through his detachment from the “slave morality” which was overwhelmingly present in the western world.

Apart from the general tendency to prefer comfort and stagnation over power and overcoming, slave morality has been criticized for two major reasons: its insistence on denying one’s own opinion in favor of the general consensus, and the attack on “master morality” by qualifying it as immoral. Conformity is a matter of survival for the “last man” who, in the absence of shoulders to press upon, falls out of line and loses his balance. Like any value, the need for blending in the crowd had its purpose. Traditionally, the protection of the tribe was a guarantee for survival. Even the fear of death diminishes when people are surrounded by their own kind. There is a promise of continuity that ousts the horror of mortality. As Don DeLillo puts it in

White Noise, “to become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone” (DeLillo 55). This shows the fears that the “herd” are incapable of shaking, and demonstrates that a man who cannot produce his own individuality relies on the group to give him an identity. This lack of creative force encourages society to stagnate, reinforcing old beliefs and misinterpretations for the sake of cohesion. Woodward notes: “Nietzsche sees “herd morality” as producing a social mediocrity in which individuals only offer values that are affirmed by the majority, and are not inspired to create their own values” (Woodward 36).

Many thinkers, such as the American Transcendentalists agreed that to rely on public approval is to commit creative suicide, while to risk rejection is the only way forward. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a keen advocate of non-conformity, wrote in his timeless essay *Self-Reliance*: “Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood” (313). The “last man” in his obsession with security, frowned upon the idea of standing out, and thus, the values he produced encouraged nothing but mediocrity.

Today, one can clearly prove Nietzsche’s predictions right. Conformity has become a lifestyle in the form of popular culture, consumerism and the politically-inclined ideologies of “group identity” that urge people to identify with their gender, skin color and background to the point of lamenting persecutions they were not victims of, or bearing a guilt they were not responsible for. That is because a man who

cannot formulate his own truth, will always seek something or someone to cling on. With the decline of Christianity, the western man did not achieve the freedom he expected. Instead, he traded a “superhuman authority” (God) with many forms of earthly dictatorships (slogans, ideologies, consumerism, hedonism...). Nietzsche wrote: “having unlearned faith in that [superhuman authority], one still follows the old habit and seeks another authority that can speak unconditionally and command goals and tasks” (Nietzsche 06).

The second reason for nihilism’s condemnation of traditional morality is its tendency to bloat the ego of the weak and discredit the achievements of the strong. The common man believes himself to be worth as much or perhaps more than his “masters”. This idea of equality, though deemed praiseworthy today, contradicted the elitist view of Nietzsche who said: “the lower classes (“herd”, “mass”, “society”) unlearns its modesty and blows up its need into cosmic and metaphysical values. In this way, the whole of existence is vulgarized” (Nietzsche 19). In other words, if everyone is equal, then the whole concepts of superiority and excellence lose their significance. The need of equality would not be problematic if the weak, by force of will and labor, endeavored to surpass their conditions and climb to the level of the strong. That act of overcoming would be in perfect alignment with Nietzschean teachings. The issue that was observed was that the masses, incapable of such prowess, attacked the values they could not attain. They painted wealth as greed, individuality as selfishness and power as tyranny, while at the same time idealizing poverty as simplicity, compliance as piety and lack of ambition as contentment. Christianity encouraged this emphasis of “lower” values, such as in the biblical verse

that reads: “Again I tell you, it easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mathew 19:21-22). For Nietzsche, this was a form of vengeance against the upper class. He believed that “Motivated by resentment, the slave condemns the life-affirmative strong traits of Master morality as evil, and elevates the traits of weakness to the level of good” (Woodward 35).

Most aspects of traditional morality, described as “slave morality” were almost in direct contradiction with the principles of Nietzscheanism. The thought that morals were carved in stone and dictated by an omniscient creator was refuted by epistemological nihilism which asserted that absolute truth is inaccessible for humans. The reliance on public consensus was countered by the need to stand out and create one’s own values. As for the idealization of “weak” morals such as humility and altruism, it was judged as a vengeful resentment against the powerful in a puny attempt to bring humanity to the level of the “lower species”. Nietzsche did more than reject the old ways. He preached the establishment of a new form of morality, a life-affirming code built by the strong where confidence, non-conformity and overcoming are at the center of people’s lives. This “master morality” promotes the worthy to the position of strength and power that sets them apart from the masses and asserts their positions of “Superior men”. Naturally, Nietzsche did not expect a victory of the *Übermensch*. Like his prophet Zarathustra, he saw himself as a thinker ahead of his time, unable to prevent the triumph of the “last man” in a western world that was gliding dangerously towards a cultural collapse.

1.3.4. Anti-Authoritarian Nihilism

Despite its focus on politics, anti-authoritarian nihilism is the rejection of all outside forces that can exert a semi-dictatorial control over man's thought and behavior. This shift from the mind to the outside world targeted all institutions that deprived the individual from his/her ability to exert his/her own will and live according to his/her own values. In other words, all symbols of authority, from the church to society to government were a hurdle to be overcome and destroyed. One can easily see the origin of such an idea in the writings of Emanuel Kant who saw this child-like allegiance to power figures as a "voluntary immaturity" to be outgrown. He defines Enlightenment as "a man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another" (Kant 01). Kant attempted to free the human mind from sheepish compliance and explained that all social and political institutions demanded a slave-like obedience. He continued: "But I hear on all sides, "Do not argue!" The Officer says: "Do not argue but drill!" The tax collector: "Do not argue but pay!" The cleric: "Do not argue but believe!" Only one prince in the world says, "Argue as much as you will, and about what you will, but obey!" Everywhere there is restriction on freedom" (02).

Emanuel Kant's call to rebel against authority was primarily intellectual. Nihilism, however, brought another dimension to this rejection. A nihilist should not only passively feel the injustice of authority, but must actively repel its limiting powers. Nietzsche affirmed that "The reduction to nothing by judgement is seconded by the reduction to nothing by hand" (Nietzsche 18). This was translated as a call to action by groups such as the Russian nihilists who used it to fuel their revolution that

aimed at reducing monarchy to anarchy, and rejecting Christian Orthodoxy in favor of a rigid atheism. Anti-authoritarian nihilism “became associated with politics because of the upheaval of the inherited social order that occurred in Russian during the 1850’s and 1860’s” (Slocombe 20). This focus on establishing nihilism “by hand” was a radical change from Kantian Enlightenment. It left the realm of academic theory and brandished the ideology like a revolutionary banner.

This form of radical nihilism failed to produce the results it aimed for. The obsession with rejecting all authority plunged society into chaos. Russian nihilism for instance, instead of bringing about the triumph of individual power “eventually deteriorated into an ethos of subversion, destruction, and anarchy, and by the late 1870s, a nihilist was anyone associated with clandestine political groups advocating terrorism and assassination” (Pratt). The creation of clandestine political groups was by itself counterintuitive to nihilism’s precepts. Being in groups conferred authority to leaders, thus relinquishing one’s free thinking and self-reliance. In addition to that, new leaders often became more authoritative and tyrannical than the powers they tried to subvert. Like the pigs in George Orwell’s *Animal farm*, “too many of this century’s rebels have become just as brutal as those whose reigns they set out to topple because they have begun to repudiate life as it is not being what their theories say it should be” (Bull 38).

Anti-authoritarian nihilism was not only concerned with overthrowing leaders and fueling rebellions. Its main concern, as a philosophy of rejection, was to demystify the role of all institutions that governed mankind, giving full power to individuals and their ability to design their life’s blueprint. It is defined in the *Internet*

Encyclopedia of Philosophy as “the belief that the destruction of all existing political, social, and religious order is a prerequisite for any future improvement” (Pratt). In the same way that man needed to shed the deadweight of old beliefs to ascend to a higher self, society was over-encumbered with impractical rules and regulations that must be annihilated to create any form of progress. The church, with its unrealistic moral standards was incapable of facing the ever-increasing problems of society. Nihilists such as the Russian critic Nikolay Chernyshevsky rejected “religious and moral assumptions as outdated and useless for the solution of social problems” (Dryzhakova 59). Politics prevented individual supremacy by demanding sheepish obedience from its subjects. As for social norms and consensus, they kept humanity at the same level of complacency, promoted “slave morality” and contributed to the vulgarization of society.

Today, anti-authoritarian nihilism is still brandished by certain groups who wish to subvert the governing powers, either as a way to instill anarchy or to impose their visions of a utopian society. One of the recent manifestations of this ideology is the 2020 Anti-police-brutality activists and protesters who took over a police station and created an “autonomous zone” in the city of Seattle. Through the declaration that the government and the police were tyrannical and useless evils to be overthrown, one can easily see the implicit yet lingering influence of political nihilism in contemporary American society.

The first part of this chapter discussed briefly the main ideologies presented by nihilism as well as its main categories. Although it provided a few examples from literature, it relied primarily on philosophy. It also focused on the early days of the

doctrine, putting Nietzsche at the center of the debate. In the second part of the first chapter, the focus will shift towards postmodern American society, the reasons for the revival of nihilism and the ways in which it still contributes to, or sometimes justifies, the continual decline of values.

1.4. Postmodern Nihilism and the Loss of Traditional Values

Nihilism started as a fringe ideology frowned upon by the conservative elite. The postmodern world, however, knew an unprecedented revival of the philosophy of disillusionment and rejection, giving it a cult-like acceptance in western society. American writers, particularly after the Second World War, heralded nihilism, injecting their writings with it, and making it an indivisible part of American thought. Such revival was not without causes. The first reason was the change in the status of nihilism, which shifted from an individualistic interpretation of the world to a recognized field of study. In the late modernist age, nihilism started to be popularized. David Storey notes: “despite nihilism’s presence at birth of German idealism (and prominence after its death), it was not to be made a subject of study in its own right until the 1930’s and 40’s” (Storey 09). Either as a direct result of the Great War or the death of idealism, one can clearly see how nihilistic themes started to haunt the writers of the era. The Lost Generation, for example, from TS Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, to William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, portrayed the dissolution of certainty and the existential pessimism that stood at the center of literary debates. Earnest Hemingway, throughout his books and his life, was a prime example of this

change because “The dominant tone of Hemingway’s work was undoubtedly a sense of the bankruptcy of values, a quasi-nihilistic despair of finding any meaning or value in a “universe of chance”. It reflected in part the widespread disillusionment affecting so many intellectuals after World War I” (Tame 01).

The First World War cast an aura of disenchantment with the world in Europe but the sense of the tragic still contained meaning in it. The Second World War, however, introduced a feeling of absurdity to a world where the suffering of millions could not be justified. Kurt Vonnegut, with novels such as *Slaughterhouse 5*, demonstrated that “the Second World War was an absurd conflict between competing ideologies, not a conflict of Good versus Evil at all” (Slocombe 222). This conflict changed the very structure of American society and the way it viewed the world. It created a permanent created a permanent shift that could not be recovered and introduced a chain of events leading to nihilism that could not be stopped. In Kurt Vonnegut’s writings, for instance, it led to a critical reevaluation of American history and a deglorification of its notable victories. In *Breakfast for Champions* (1973), Vonnegut reduced the European discovery of the new world from the genesis of a glorious nation to a mere act of pillaging. He wrote: “The teachers told the children that this was when their continent was discovered by human beings. Actually, millions of human beings were already living full and imaginative lives on the continent in 1492. That was simply the year in which sea pirates began to cheat and rob and kill them” (Vonnegut 10). The satirical approach to serious, and sometimes even morbid topics is one of the aspects of a new intellectual movement called postmodernism. This movement emerged from the destruction, both literal and

metaphorical, caused by the Second World War, “from the ashes of the massive economic, emotional, and physical devastation of this war, the postmodern phoenix rose” (Slocombe 77).

It is important to note that around this time, and perhaps till the present, attempts had been made to create new values to fill the void left by the widespread of nihilism. As seen earlier, man is unable to bear a meaningless existence and must cling to any true or fabricated sense of purpose lest he falls into self-destructive despair. For these reasons, “the Post World War Two generation came to employ a menagerie of terms – “values”, “lifestyle”, “creativity”, “the self”, and “culture” to name a few - to replace traditional social and religious norms, but divested them of their original meanings, or at least their implication” (Storey 14). These new ideas ended up accentuating the feeling of inadequacy rather than generating meaning. The concept of “lifestyle”, for instance, created a society of mass-consumers who linked their identities to their possessions. Most importantly, what these new interpretations of the world lacked was a remedy to man’s deepest fear; death. Instead of the metaphysical justification of life and its possible continuation after death, the only offered solution was a drug-like dependance on entertainment, information and the unquenchable chase for wealth. This overflow of distractions accentuated the spiritual detachment that tried to banish any thought of fragility. This resulted in the rise of the existential angst that fueled many of the era’s literary works.

One of the most notable attempts to create a new utopian society was the emergence of the 1970’s counterculture, more commonly known as the hippie movement. The exodus towards independent communities was a rebellion against the

government and its failure to preserve human life. This was not only the memory of the Second World War but also the involvement of the USA in the Vietnam War. However, the replacement of the state proved to be more of an escape from responsibility than an active struggle to improve society. Counterculture also tried to free the minds from consumerism and the manipulation of the media, but the methods it employed, such as drug use and libertinism, caused more sickness than healing. Neither the government nor Counterculture could substitute for the lost values, and this contributed to the rise of this new wave of nihilism that thrived “between the idealism and behavior of the state, as evinced by the war, and between the ideals and behaviors of those offering an alternative to the state, as evinced by the degeneration of Counterculture idealism into drug addiction and bad faith” (Bull 50).

Another reason for the emergence of postmodern nihilism was predicted by Nietzsche. He prophesied that the apparent scientific and technological advances displayed by the west were also, paradoxically, the reasons for its cultural and moral downfall. Society loses touch with the treasures of its past when it gazes confidently at the future because “the more energetically and boldly it advances, the richer it will be in failures and deformities, the closer to decline” (Nietzsche 25). That was by no means a criticism of development or a desperate call to return to the roots. It was rather an expression of the natural course of events as observed in past history. Post-War American society knew a similar colossal leap forward in terms of technological and economic progress. It is logical then to assume that these circumstances contributed to the emergence of a new values crisis. This idea of the negative effects of progress had been discussed by the Transcendentalists who, a century before the

Second World War, noticed the slippery slope in which their country was advancing. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: “Society never advances. It recedes as fast on one side as it gains on the other. It undergoes continual change; it is barbarous, it is civilized, it is Christianized, it is rich, it is scientific; but this change is not amelioration – for everything that is given, something is taken” (Emerson 329-330).

The problem with the new “Americanized” nihilism was that it did not present itself as an individual response that negates the limitations of progress and asserts its own revolutionary visions. It came to being as a form of popular, herd-like uneasiness with life and an attempt to cope with (and not overcome) the existential void. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche predicted that, in a nihilistic world, two forces can prevail: either the life-affirming strength of the Übermensch, or the conformist defeatism of the “last man”. The American philosopher Allan Bloom noted that his society demonstrated the victory of the latter. In *The Closing of the American Mind*, “he illustrates how nihilism has been democratized, normalized, and neutered in American culture. This watered down, latter day version of nihilism represents, for Bloom, the victory of Nietzsche’s “last man”” (Storey 14).

The pessimistic and the passive spiral towards nihilism was noticed by many postmodern American writers. Some of them, such as Walker Percy attempted to counter the fall and resuscitate the old values, mostly by reigniting the Christian faith, while others resorted to the absurd to caricaturize the status-quo. Don DeLillo, whose novel *White Noise* will be discussed in details in the second chapter, noticed the general purposelessness of his generation and the existential repressed anxiety in which they bathed. In a letter to fellow writer Anthony DeCurtis, he explains the

reasons for the pessimistic, sometimes apocalyptic tone of his works. He explained: “what I see is suspicion and distrust and fear, and so, of course, these things inform my books” (Letter to DeCurtis, qtd. in Bull 57).

In the midst of a crisis, the possibility of overcoming is always present. In the postmodern world, however, there were a few elements that prevented man from breaking his shackles and seeking his own salvation. There was no tyrannical government that kept its citizens in total submission as George Orwell predicted in his novel *1984*. Instead, a more subtle form of docility, almost induced by drugs, similar to the one introduced in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* seems to have prevailed. The postmodern man’s Soma⁴ was the constant bombardment of information and the escapism provided by entertainment. Television, for instance, with its mind-controlling ability created hordes of conformist consumers.

In *Vineland* (1990), Thomas Pynchon locates the failure to nurture free thinking in the birth of “The Tube”; an exaggerated depiction of mass media, similar to Orwell’s “Eye” that must be kept on at all times. He writes: “they just let us forget. Give us too much to process, fill up every minute, keep us distracted, it’s what the tube is for” (Pynchon 314). The media, with its constant flow of carefully-manipulated information provided neither time nor mental clarity for individuals to break free from the herd. This phenomenon has only increased in intensity as the “Tube” moved from the living room to people’s pockets. The informational enslavement reached its summum malum with the widespread of social media, while

⁴ A fictional drug used by the government in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) that keeps citizens in a constant euphoric state of contentment, and prevents them from thinking critically or rebelling against their dystopian society.

conformity is enforced by movements such as the recent “cancel culture” that shuts down any argument that contradict the popular narrative.

The state of mental slavery is not always imposed because, in many cases, it can be a voluntary numbing of the senses to escape the ever-increasing burden of responsibility. Like Nietzsche’s “last man”, the postmodern nihilist is apprehensive of risks and sacrifices and sees them as meaningless. He then seeks and clings to any form of comfort that maintains him in his vegetative state and blinds him to his existentialist uncertainties. The popularization of recreational drugs and their legalization in many parts of North America resembles a revival of the 1970’s Counterculture, but it is not the only, and certainly not the most dangerous, enemy to mental freedom. Movies, video games, overidentification with performers, and an armada of entertainment tools keep individuals fixated with an imaginary feeling of solace that disconnects them from reality and keeps them content. Chuck Palahniuk noticed this tendency of rejecting reality to cope with the creeping nihilism. In his short story *Zombies* (2015), he writes about a generation of youngsters who, fueled by extreme pessimism, decided to lobotomize themselves. The self-inflicted removal of parts of their brains plunges them into a child-like oblivion to real world’s problems, “the brain-damaged state they desire is a self-destructive measure that negates and escapes the cultural-political pressures and expectation of the contemporary world” (M’Rabty 05). This hyperbolic description in Palahniuk’s work satirizes the contemporary nihilist’s attachment to comfort and inaction.

Another element that testifies to the passivity of the postmodern nihilist is his lack of purpose and goals. The high ideals to which life could be dedicated lost their

appeal and were no longer worth fighting for. Patriotism was portrayed as brutish violence since governments acted as puppeteers using their youth as firewood to fuel their political and economic greed. Religion, with the rise of science, was painted as ignorance and was slowly pushed to the margin. Life, being short and meaningless, was transformed into a race towards instant gratification with slogans such as “enjoy the moment” being constantly waved by advertisement companies. In the absence of a direction towards which noble attentions could be steered, “the postmodern man has stopped waiting for Godot. The absurd is not met with despair; rather it is living with what it, a making of the best of it, a relief from the burden of finding yourself a goal of life” (Kvale 38). This feeling of “relief” from responsibility is often the cause of existential crises, for if life has no intrinsic meaning, what would be the reason for human existence? Is it all an elaborate evolutionary scheme to preserve and continue the species? Questions like these are inevitable and can only be drowned, as seen earlier, in constant distractions, a race for instant gratification, or a sheepish self-induced ignorance. Friedrich Nietzsche who was a fervent advocator of active nihilism declared “He whose life has a why can bear almost any how” (qtd. in Peterson 62), arguing that to have a purpose is to inject strength into one’s life. This is further confirmed by Jordan B. Peterson who, in the hope of banishing the discouragement he observed in the youth, wrote: “Don’t underestimate the power of vision and direction. These are irresistible forces, able to transform what might appear to be unconquerable obstacles into traversable pathways and expanding opportunities” (62).

Although postmodern nihilism was not a global phenomenon that contaminated all of American society, it is undeniable that it was (and still is) a considerable force in contemporary culture since the Second World War. Through its implicit influence, and aided by the metamorphosis of societal structure, it contributed to the fall of some the most sacred values and principles upon which the United States of American were founded.

1.5. Devaluating Values in Contemporary American Culture

1.5.1. Morality

The postmodern age is the embodiment of Nietzschean predictions. The very definition of his ideology (and the inspiration behind this thesis) was “That the highest values devalue themselves” (Nietzsche 09). This fact, as will be demonstrated, was crystalized into reality after being for too long considered nothing but the gloomy laments of a pessimist. Morality, with the rise of individualism, was the first to fall. One of the flaws of traditional morality was, for Nietzsche, the fact that it was not based on truth, but rather on a sense of social usefulness. Promiscuity, for instance, was initially discouraged because of the risk of disease and unwanted pregnancies it often caused, not because it was inherently evil. Marriage on the other hand was a viable way of controlling society and producing a constant flow of well-provided-for offspring. For Nietzsche, “all these values are, psychologically considered, the result of certain perspectives of utility, designed to maintain and increase human constructs of domination” (14). This was by no means a way to

denigrate these institutions and the laws build around them, but rather a reminder that their establishment was based on practicality. Once they are no longer useful, these fragile “constructs” easily break down. In the case of monogamous relationships (Christian marriage) versus sexual promiscuity, one can easily notice how the system collapsed after the invention of the birth control pill and the revolution of contraceptive measures in the 20th century. Without a strong system such as religion to keep watch, the institution of marriage was under attack. Today, values such as chastity and modesty became relics of the past, birth rates are declining and pornography is a multibillion dollars industry.

Values based on utility do not only self-destruct, they unleash the ghosts of their antithesis. Evil, devoid of a logical reason to be avoided, can become good once it starts to serve a personal end. This was hyperbolized in Richard Wright’s Posthumously published work *The Man Who Lived Underground*⁵. The novel, besides being an existential dive into the psyche of a “double outcast” (both as an individual in a strange society and a black man in a white-governed country), pondered upon questions of values, and whether evil can be accepted if it fulfills some personal purpose. Wright’s character asserts: “Yes, if a world as men had made it was right, then anything else was right, any act man took to satisfy himself, murder, theft, torture” (qtd. in Slocombe 162). In this worldview imagined by the writer, values are nothing but a matter of self-satisfaction.

⁵ According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, *The Man Who Lived Underground* was a rejected manuscript dating to 1941. It was later condensed into a short story and published in 2021. (Gates, s.d.)

The act of placing the self at the center of the universe and basing values on its whimsical demands is the epitome of ethical nihilism. It strips morality from its intrinsic worth in two ways. First, it gives absolute control to the ego and makes it the judge of right and wrong. This can be seen as a direct interpretation of Nietzsche's plea to create one's own values (and thus be a form of active nihilism), or as a desperate attempt to give importance to "lower individuals" governed by their "slave morality". The fact that Wright's character shuns society instead of asserting his will associates him with the latter category because it is in direct contradiction with Nietzsche's *Amor Fati* and the "Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception or selection" (Nietzsche 536).

The second element that makes this "personal morality" nihilistic is the end that it aims to achieve. It does not aspire to a noble aim or the elevation of the spirit but only wishes to reach instant gratification. In Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, for example, the main character finds himself helping the man he shot multiple times "for maximum pain" not as a form of concerned altruism but because being in control and deciding to inflict or prevent death (instead of passively awaiting it) filled him with a sense of superiority and self-righteousness. In other cases, the moral choices taken by individuals who abide by principles for the sake of utility are dictated by more base pursuits. The concept of polyamory that was publicized in the west during the last decade for instance, enabled individuals to maximize pleasure and minimize responsibility. This personal approach to morality is thus highly nihilistic because "by far, the most important aspect of ethical nihilism is its seeming tendency towards egocentricity and hedonism, in that, if no absolute morals exist, one can act exactly as

one pleases” (Slocombe 13). Governments and power-seekers took advantage of the absence of ethical absolutes to create their own. In their hands, however, this act exceeded the need of self-satisfaction and quickly became a tool for control.

In the contemporary world, the tendency to base morality on its personal, social or political usefulness became a blatant reality, wielded masterfully in the hands of decision-makers. Many of the slogans brandished today are nothing but a manifestation of a need to control the masses disguised as a noble cause. The US government, particularly in its foreign policy, uses a plethora of seemingly moral justifications to assert its supremacy. Gianni Vattimo writes: “American dominance masked as democratic humanitarianism threatens to impose a kind of universal state of police which is ‘legitimized’ by an (alleged) respect for human rights” (22). When the western world was “Christianized”, kings claimed to be the bridge between their subjects and their creator, and when religion was replaced by rationality, governments rushed to proclaim themselves the champions of the new humanitarian ideals. In the absence of a firm value system, individuals are either swayed by the constantly changing sense of “good”, or completely disoriented, abandoning the idea of objective morality altogether.

Politics is not the only domain in which utility took the reins of values. Advertisement companies managed to convince the masses that their personal good lies in obediently increasing the revenues of big companies. One can look at the ideal health standards hammered into the heads of consumers through television. In the 1980’s and 1990’s, the narrative sold to the public was that a slim figure was the pinnacle of health, generating millions of dollars in sales of diet programs, exercise

tapes and plastic surgery. Today, when the former methods proved useless, heads were turned towards ideas of “body acceptance”, featuring overweight models on magazine covers and hypnotizing the masses with the “beauty” of all body shapes regardless of their internal health condition. This, while it may seem progressive to some, was a subterfuge that made the fortune of food chains, clothing brands and social media technocrats. Once again, the “last man” does not question but, like Orwell’s sheep in *Animal Farm*, blurts out repeatedly the ideas fed to him by his masters.

The source of the fragility and permutability of values in postmodernism is an obsession with “rationality”. Ideas are no longer accepted without answering the fundamental “why”. Faith is no longer a valid argument and the line between good and evil has been blurred because “utility was declared to be the sole criterion of good, and goodness and utility were deemed to be simply the product of ‘reason’” (Dryzhakova 59). In the postmodern ethos, flying the banner of reason and burning the remnants of faith is branded as a human victory against obscurantism. However, individuals, being prone to follow, have only replaced the old gods by a new idol, a “deified reason”. The nihilistic element of this idea is that individuals do not, as it was intended by the enlightenment thinkers, resort to logic and intellect to formulate their own opinions of the world or choose to make a Kierkegaardian “leap of faith” when rationality fails. Instead, they bow to any argument that claims to stem from reason. This makes them slaves to all sorts of scientific elites and technocrats. Nihilist philosophers such as Martin Heidegger advised against this dependance on pragmatic thinking because, since the human mind is limited, our judgement would inevitably

become narrowed if divorced from any influence outside our realm of understanding. In *The Question of Being*, Heidegger writes, “thinking begins only when we have come to know that reason, glorified for centuries, is the most stiff-necked adversary to thought” (qtd. in Bull 22). Since the Second World War, the world knew unprecedented scientific and technological advances that furthered the belief in deified reason. Despite the undeniable advantages of the triumph of the scientific method, this blind faith in logic created a different form of ignorance. As seen earlier, when society progresses in an area, it recedes in another. In this case, the overdependence on rationality caused the decline of truth, morality and the very purpose of human existence.

1.5.2. The Meaning of Life

The first thing that the intellectual revolution of the Enlightenment age brought was the destruction of the old idols. Religion, being outside the realm of measurements and experiments was quickly pushed to the margin. Intellectual atheism turned from a matter-of-fact result of rational thinking to a form of secular inquisition. The authority of science was imposed and its theories were to be taken at face value no matter how unreliable or prone to change they were. David Hollinger argues that “the enlightenment promoted absolutist and imperialist initiatives. Above all, the Enlightenment project blinded us to the uncertainties of knowledge by promoting an ideal of absolute scientific certainty” (Hollinger 08). The forceful eradication of faith from modern philosophy, as well as its replacement by science,

with its pragmatic, often crude view of humanity, led to a serious crisis: the devaluation of human life. In the ancient world, man was more than a living organism to be put under a microscope. His fleshly vessel housed a soul, an immortal state of being that linked him to eternity and elevated him to a semi-divine position. The decline of religion (and spirituality as a whole) severed this link and reduced human life to an amalgam of chemicals and blood vessels.

In postmodern fiction, the idea of man being no more than a soulless machine was brought forward by many novelists. In *Breakfast for Champions*, Kurt Vonnegut introduced his characters by this remark: “I tend to think of human beings as huge, rubbery test tubes, too, with chemical reactions seething inside” (03). This reduces all actions, no matter how noble or vile, to the activity of synapses and neurotransmitters, stripping humanity from its spiritual nature. It might be understandable for writers who knew the atrocities of the Second World War to use such terminology in order to lessen the impact that the mass loss of human lives had on their minds (this can be observed more in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*). However, it is undoubtable that the scientific progress of their era contributed to reducing individuals to the status of lab rats. In his essay, *Nihilism and Technology*, Barry Cooper exposes the role that technological advances had in cheapening the once sacred value of nature saying: “one of the unsettling consequences is that technology does nothing. To be more precise, it dissolves the world while understanding the dissolution of the world as its transformation. Sometimes this is called progress” (166).

The threat of technology's dark side became a major theme in postmodern literature. Through its denigration of human value, it risked breaking the social structure on which it was built. This sparked the emergence of one of the most significant themes in postmodern nihilist fiction: the apocalypse. The idea of the dissolution of order and the rise of complete anarchy is deeply nihilistic. It puts man in a world devoid of all values, and attempts to explore whether he can craft his own meaning or succumb to his insignificance. In other words, it is a fictionalized, hyperbolized version of the postmodern cosmos. Will Slocombe notes: "one of the most explicit strands of nihilism throughout postmodern literature is the concept of apocalypse...the apocalypse symbolises complete destruction; nothing functions, nothing matters" (157). This "structural desert" puts ideals to the test because in a setting devoid of markers to find one's place in the universe, meaning, including the meaning of one's life, quickly disintegrates. This is well demonstrated by Jorge Luis Borges in his short story *The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths* (1939). In this story, the first king is put in a maze full of narrow paths and stairways. This fails to disorient him because it was full of landmarks to base his position on. When his turn comes, he offers a different kind of labyrinth to his adversary; a desert, a postapocalyptic scenery dominated by nothingness. He says:

In Babylonia didst thou attempt to make me lose my way in a labyrinth of brass with many stairways, doors and walls; now the Powerful One has seen fit to allow me to show thee mine, which has no stairways to climb, no doors to force, nor warrying galleries to wander through, nor walls to impede thy passage. (Borges 264)

The second king dies amidst the nothingness of the desert where he found no obstacles to overcome. Here again, it is the absence of purpose that plunges individuals into nihilism and there is no concept that symbolizes this lack of meaning more than the wasteland. In postmodern fiction, influenced by technology and war, the idea of absence transforms from the “orientalist” romanticized desert to the destroyed western cities of the apocalypse. The fourth chapter of this thesis explores this theme fully with Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.

It is important to note that the postmodern apocalypse is different from the biblical one on a fundamental level. It is characterized by a refusal or an impossibility of salvation and ascension. The fictional end of the world does not lead to a promised paradise. It forces man to face a bleak reality in which death (and the “nihil” associated with it) is the final destination. In Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), an environmental catastrophe resulted in mass infertility. In that reality, not only does the individual cease to exist, but any chance of continuity of the species is eradicated, thus promoting the idea of death as the final judge. The main character imagines the death of her husband saying: “the body is so easily damaged, so easily disposed of, water and chemicals is all it is, hardly more than a jellyfish, dying on sand” (Atwood 106). The scientific, detached vocabulary and the inexistence of a final repose for the body (not even a funeral that would give death a ceremonial depth), emphasizes the mediocrity of the human conditions. Even the word “sand” remotely evokes the sense of desert and gives the feeling of “thrownness” in which the dead, as well as the living, are lost.

In addition to the feeling of insignificance that science creates through proving the fragility of human life in an accidentally created universe, the constant flow of new and changing information puts individuals at a loss. Under the façade of certainty, science offers very little to ease the existential dread associated with a meaningless existence. Steven Bull notes: "...living in the late twentieth century's technological paradise can still leave one feeling 'unaccommodated' and alone – lost and unsure in a world of ceaseless change that seems to continually undermine one's beliefs and sense of security" (09). The twenty-first century, with its pervasive technology and bombardment of information, accentuates this loss, and by extension, creates a society of exasperated individuals unable to crystalize a clear image of the reality in which they live. These "lost souls" will be forced to either grow comfortable with the idea of not knowing or be forced to thoughtlessly follow the commands of the ruling elite. Gianni Vattimo explains that the "idealization of a knowledge freed from opacities and ultimately modelled upon the scientific method always runs the risk of legitimizing a future world dominated by 'experts' of various kinds" (22). One can only see how the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic sparked both attitudes. The varying reports and the apparent helplessness of authorities pushed many people to disbelieve in the existence of the disease. At the same time, pharmaceutical companies imposed their vaccines on the general population, and governments presented themselves as "experts", controlling an army of compliant, branded, frightened citizens. Fear, sparked by the uncertainties generated by progress, proves once more the analysis made by Nietzsche. In *The Will to Power*, he describes this process in detail:

Faith in "progress"—in the lower spheres of intelligence it appears as ascending life; but this is self-deception; in the higher spheres of intelligence as decending life.

Description of the symptoms.

Unity of point of view; uncertainty about standards of value.

Fear of a general "in vain."

Nihilism.

(Nietzsche 70)

The general sense of "in-vain" brought by the decline of religion and the rise of scientific atheism and existentialism turned postmodernism into an era of apocalypse, both literally and symbolically. The overemphasis on fragility, as opposed to the old ideals of traditional heroism, placed death at the centre of the literary scene. Death, in the nihilistic psyche, has no redemptive value nor a desired outcome like the myth of martyrdom that was erased by the Second World War. The apocalypse also marked the death of the old world and its fixed value structure. For these reasons, postmodern literature is fixated on the concept of death and rebirth, or sometimes only death as a recurrent theme that sparks both fear and fascination. The three case-study novels that will be explored in the second, third and fourth chapter have death and destruction at their very centre. In Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, they stand as a looming fear, devaluing existence and the meaning of life. They are inflicted on the self and others in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* as a way of dismantling the social order. Finally, they are omnipresent in the postapocalyptic

world of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, erasing the last remnant of morality that the main characters pain to rekindle.

The three novels, as well as many other postmodern works, also discuss a prevalent problem in the contemporary world created by modernity; the widespread of epistemological nihilism. The loss of the concept of truth is no longer a philosophical proposition made by a minority of philosophers, but a phenomenon which pervades American culture. It is constantly reinforced by science's endless re-evaluations of reality, as well as mass media's overflow of misleading, often contradictory information.

1.5.3. Truth

In Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, where people read tabloids about aliens with the same seriousness as news reports, a toxic cloud spread across the city creating confusion among the citizens, mostly because of the lack of knowledge about the phenomenon rather than the harm it may cause. The radio was broadcasting new information that was constantly changing, which was causing panic among the masses. The reports were overwhelming and lacked clear explanation. In his attempts to make sense of the world around him, Heinrich, the protagonist's son, says "What good is knowledge if it just floats in the air? It goes from computer to computer. It changes and grows every second of every day. But nobody actually knows anything" (DeLillo 112). This is one of the reasons for adopting epistemological nihilism in contemporary society. Knowledge, while it seems widely available, remains vague,

constantly altered and rarely trusted, prompting the desperate truth-seeker to abandon his search. Two options are in view: those unable to detach themselves from the herd will be incapable of forming a fixed opinion out of the conflicting information, and thus will be easily manipulated by self-appointed truth-holders. On the other hand, those who refuse to identify with the masses and tire from looking for an elusive sense of certainty abandon their search altogether and declare that nothing can be known for certain. This is the beginning of the devaluation of truth, or as Donald Crosby explains it in *The Spectre of the Absurd*, “Once set in motion, the process of questioning could come to but one end, the erosion of conviction and certitude and collapse into despair” (02).

One can easily be tempted to believe that the prevalence of mass information would render truth available to the public. However, the scientific method is by definition non-dogmatic in the sense that it cannot dictate definitive answers and must be open to change and re-evaluation. This is an important element to progress and, when confined to the lab, it proves essential. Applying this rational thinking to society and its manufacturing of values, however, prevents it from having a solid foundation on which it must be built. Also, the very act of formulating a rigid opinion is regarded as tyrannical. As seen with the gender difference illustrated with the example of Matt Walsh’s documentary, claiming a formerly-elementary thing such as defining genders based on biological sex is regarded as bigoted and sparks a harsh backlash from the public opinion. The list of possible genders is constantly expanding, changing the English language in its wave through the invention of new pronouns. This attitude does not only dissolve the concept of truth but prevents any possibility of it. This

issue is very specific to this era because “perhaps the most identifying mark of postmodernism is its flat denial of the possibility of Truth” (Sabouri 279).

The fear of having convictions led to a fragility of values which collapsed with every new interpretation of reality. The modern world was deemed too complex to be comprehended. The multiplicity of potential realities without the ability to crystalize a single vision of truth is the epitome of nihilism because it renders all values, including morality, groundless, since they were first introduced out of utility and created out of a fragile and ever-changing cosmos. It is also a sign of the triumph of the “last man” who, instead of steering his own ship, chooses to embark on a current-bound raft and drifts, ghostlike, without forming any attachment to his reality in a manner akin to Camus’ Meursault in *L’étranger*. Confusion leads to aimlessness, and aimlessness leads to nihilism which leads to unforeseen, often self-destructive results. Jordan Peterson explains:

Perhaps you think (moment to moment, at least) that it is best to avoid confrontation and drift along in apparent but false peace. Make no mistake about it, however: you age as you drift, just as rapidly as you age as you strive. But you have no direction when you drift, and the probability that you will obtain what you need and want by drifting aimlessly is very low. Things fall apart of their own accord, but the sins of men speed their deterioration: that is wisdom from the ages. (*Beyond Order* 44)

The postmodern man's mistrust of absolute truths can also be understood as a form of rebellion. Postmodernism carried with it the weight of the Second World War, and many writers of the era in the likes of Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth, and Thomas Pynchon, set some of their novels in that sombre phase of history. To these authors, the war was a series of ideological lies disguised as a noble struggle. This started the disenchantment with politics and patriotism. At the same time, religion was constantly being discredited by the advance of scientism. The holy wars and inquisitions it initiated destroyed its credibility and painted it as another form of tyranny. In Kurt Vonnegut's satirical novel *Cat's Cradle* (1963), the dominant ideology is a religion called "Bokonism". Its tenets were crafted to caricature society's view on both politics and Christianity, "The first sentence in The Books of Bokkonon is this: 'All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies'" (07). The paradox is cleverly placed to symbolize the distrust of even the most reputable institutions. It also shows the public's eagerness to cling to false truths even when they know them to be lies. Whether to accept falsehood in the hope of attaining psychological comfort, or to abandon the burden of truth-seeking altogether, the result remains the same. Both attitudes accept the proposition that there is no objective truth.

It is important to understand at this point that abandoning values is not always seen as a tragedy. Many contemporary thinkers believe that nihilism freed man from the shackles of old obligations. Steinar Kvale argues that after leaving the myth of finding a purpose, "what remains may be a happy nihilism" (Kvale 38). Escaping the burden of having a higher aim leaves free range for individualism and/or hedonism. In addition to that, some philosophers see it as a form of progress that must

be praised instead of lamented. The British philosopher and university professor Ray Brassier, in *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*, clarifies: “the disenchantment of the world deserves to be celebrated as an achievement of intellectual maturity, not bewailed as a debilitating impoverishment” (xi). This thesis, however, for the sake of consistency, will take a stance and adopt the opinion of those who see nihilism as a tragedy, not as a victory.

1.6. Conclusion

The first chapter explained briefly how nihilistic thinking, paired with the radical changes in social structure brought about by modernity, caused the decline of traditional values and left the postmodern man in a meaningless void, forced to find his own purpose lest he sinks into existential despair. The concept of devaluation, however, remains vague and needs further examples. The next three chapters will each rely on a novel to explore the three main types of devaluation: existential, social, and moral. The main characters of the chosen works all suffer from alienation and find themselves faced with the absence of solid ground to build meaningful values. Their common feeling is existential anguish, which is “the dread of nothingness of human existence” (Lavine 372). What is different is their attitude towards it. While some characters, like DeLillo’s Jack Gladney, shrink into despair, Palahniuk’s unnamed protagonist (through a dissociative identity disorder) attempts to assert his repressed will through chaos and destruction (and self-destruction). On the other hand, McCarthy’s father and son duo, simply referred to as “the man” and “the boy”,

fight to preserve not only their lives, but also the remnants of morality in a postapocalyptic wasteland where survival blurred the lines between good and evil.

The three novels deal with the concept of apocalypse that was discussed in this chapter in three different ways. In *White Noise*, the end of the world is an imminent danger embodied in the form of a toxic cloud threatening to eradicate human life. The novel however, remains an existential work and as such, the bigger threat unfolds at the individual level and manifests itself as the fear of the ultimate form of nothingness; death.

In *Fight Club*, the apocalypse symbolizes the literal and metaphorical destruction of the protagonist's "ordinary" life. It is not the end of the objective world, but the annihilation of the simulacrum in which he lives. At the same time, the protagonist's alter ego Tyler Durden and his gang of self-proclaimed revolutionaries, seek the destruction of all civilization as the only way to restore humanity.

Finally, McCarthy's *The Road* takes the concept of apocalypse literally and thrusts its characters beyond destruction, in an environment devoid of any social or moral order. The father and son have the choice to let themselves be devoured by the nothingness that surrounds them or oppose it at the peril of their own lives. The three novels, with their focus on the four main existential themes; Absurdity, death, alienation, and anxiety, attempt to expose the predominant nihilism of their era and the crisis of values in which postmodernism thrived.

CHAPTER TWO:

Epistemological Nihilism and the Devaluation of Truth and Meaning in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

CHAPTER TWO

Epistemological Nihilism and the Devaluation of Truth and Meaning in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

2.1. Introduction

When dealing with contemporary American literature, it is inevitable to come into contact with at least one of Don DeLillo's novels. He has had, over the last four decades some of the most significant contributions to the American cultural landscape. As John N. Duval notes, three of DeLillo's works "were ranked top twenty [of the best American novels in the past 25 years]. *Underworld* (1997) (runner up to Toni Morrison's 1987 *Beloved*), *White Noise*, and *Libra* (1988)" (Duvall 01). This fact brings a certain legitimacy to his influence and thus to his ability to play the role of a critic of his society. Of this list, one book in particular, *White Noise* (1985) serves as an exploration of postmodern American culture and the gradual dissolving of meaning in the sea of consumerism, mass-media and nihilism, all done in a critical yet prudent way, withholding judgement and handing the reigns to the reader who finds himself, like the protagonist, Jack Gladney, marooned in a world of random and often unrelated events, desperately trying to make sense of the experiences he is exposed to. This ambiguity, best illustrated by Gladney's character, opens the novel to free interpretation since the writer does not dictate his opinion through his protagonist. Frank Lentricchia explains: "Like Melville's Ishmeal, Twain's Huck and Fitzgerald's

Nick Carraway, DeLillo's Jack Gladney is a sharp observer and commentator who at the same time participates -often to the reader's bewilderment- in an action which fatally shapes him, so that he will not understand with total lucidity what it is he observes, or he himself really is..." (78). We are then confronted with a novel that does not offer a detached voice feeding the reader elements of the plot and its hidden frequencies but with a pawn both shaping and succumbing to his reality. *White Noise* is then, mostly through its protagonist, an unbiased introspection of a culture, whereas the plot, or lack thereof (as will be explained), is a clear formulation of the issues that plagued it. Naturally, this would only be understood through a brief journey through the events of the story.

White Noise invites us to spend a year of seemingly mundane yet chaotic events in the life of Jack Gladney, a university professor who made a name for himself by creating and chairing the department of Hitler studies in the college-on-the-hill. With his wife Babette and their children from different marriages, these inhabitants of the small college town of Blacksmith float through life as observers, crushed by the weight of circumstances. The novel opens with Jack watching the hopeful and self-absorbed students congregating at the university's parking lot. We are introduced to a man observing from a window a world that seems different from his; an early glimpse of alienation. With his black gown reminiscent of the old days, and his remarks on his own student years, one can sense an attachment to a remote time that no longer exists. What comes after, can be divided into three parts: a dive into the Gladney's domestic and social life and the cultural environment that shaped them, the advent of the "airborne toxic event" and the exodus to escape (or draw near)

its deadly effects, and finally the discovery of the mysterious drug named Dylar responsible for Babette's infidelity and Jack's failed transformation into a vengeful killer. This oversimplification of the plot remains vague but it reveals one key point which is the apparent unrelatedness and discontinuity of events in the novel. Made especially obvious in the first part, but continuing throughout the novel, there seems to be no greater narrative that guides the reader through a coherent journey. There are many happenings (like the disappearance of old man Treadwell or the sudden emergence of spiders in the house) that are mentioned only briefly, then forgotten casually, without having a clear effect on the story. One might think that this chaotic narration is only a way to fill up the pages or plunge us deeper into the mundane details of suburban life. Yet, it reveals a technique that betrays the very central theme of the novel, a unique method known as "plotlessness".

The seeming lack of governing structure is a very conscious choice in *White Noise*, a choice made apparent from the very title that suggests the confusion that would ensue. According to Tom Le Clair, the very word "White Noise" means "aperiodic sound with frequencies of random amplitude and random interval -a term for chaos" (27). The avoidance of linear development represents the mindset of the narrator and protagonist who, for a deeply rooted reason, prefers to be at the mercy of the whims of life rather than to follow a clear path. He says: "May the days be aimless. Let the seasons drift. Do not advance the action according to a plan" (DeLillo 115). Lentricchia explains that "The novel is narrated by a man who fears plot in both conspirational and literary senses -a distinction hard to make in DeLillo's world- and who therefore resists them, even prays for plotlessness, a life ungoverned by design

and intention” (Lentriccia 82). This tendency can be interpreted as a mark of the Nietzschean “last man” as will be demonstrated later, but it is also, as Jack Gladney himself admits, a symptom of a deeper neurosis: the fear of death. When asked about plot, Jack addresses his students and explains that ““All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers’ plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children’s games. We edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot”” (DeLillo 36). With these words, we are introduced to the premise of the novel and the main mover for Jack and his wife Babette. At the center of their empty life, lies the fear of the ultimate nothingness: death.

The driving force, or rather, to use T.S Eliot’s expression “the paralyzing force” that binds the two adult Gladneys is their dread of dying. In the case of Jack, he is often awakened in the middle of the night, shaking and sweating, tentatively checking the clock and interpreting its numbers as a presage to his impending doom: “Is death odd-numbered? Are there life-enhancing numbers, other numbers charged with menace?” (DeLillo 61). Jack avoids plots, hides in crowds, take shelter in his family, accumulates possessions, all in the hope of gaining “life credit” that might ward off death a little longer. As for Babette, though appearing to hold a firm grasp on life, especially to her husband, she is discovered sneakily taking an experimental drug, Dylar, that allegedly suppresses the fear of death. Her reliance on this mostly placebic method, not only caused her a chronic loss of memory, but forced her to offer her own body to the supplier, Willie Mink, in exchange for this hazardous new piece of biotechnology.

One might argue that the fear of death is imbued in human consciousness. It is the price to pay for an evolved cerebrum. As Jack himself notes, the irony of human existence is “that we are the highest form of life on earth and yet ineffably sad because we know what no other animal knows, that we must die” (DeLillo 116). Yet, there is a deeper explanation, more linked to the concept of nihilism in the postmodern world. For centuries, people willingly faced their demise for a cause or a purpose, be it country, love, religion or pride. There floated, in the subconscious of the culture, concepts greater than mere survival, ideas that lived beyond human sacrifice. In postmodernism, however, hedonistic nihilism made it so that all these concepts vanished in the face of individualism. As it is explained in Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*: “We don’t have a great war in our generation, or a great depression. The great depression is our lives” (149). In the absence of purpose, the “nothing” settles in, and death with its all-erasing strength, intensifies it. In other words, Jack Gladney is afraid of the “nihil” and as the American philosopher T.Z. Lavine perfectly illustrates it, “Nothingness, in the form of death, which is my final nothingness, hangs over me like a sword of Damocles at each moment of my life” (373).

The real tragedy of Jack Gladney is not only his crippling fear, but the fact that his avoidance of life is continually drawing him closer to the thing he fears the most because if life is movement, a refusal to budge is a denial of life, or as John Brooks explains it, “If the self is a narrative that weaves thoughts, desires and feelings into a coherent whole, then Jack’s fear of physical death is causing an inactivity that is ironically, killing him” (49).

It is the lack of life-affirming pursuits that plunges Jack's world into nihilism and since he is alienated from his own life, for fear of being swooped by its current that leads deathward, he moves to a position of observer, attempting to interpret events through his modernist, often metaphysical lens. This chapter follows his journey through both mundane and sometimes surreal experiences and tries to explain the reasons behind the loss of meaning and truth in DeLillo's postmodern American culture, as well as the different methods that his characters adopted to counter, or in some cases embrace, the creeping nihilism of their era.

2.2. "Looking for Meaning Where There is None": Jack Gladney's Alienation and the World of Simulacra

Jack Gladney's sensitivity to the confusion that characterizes his time comes from the fact that his inner world remained in modernism. From his faith in the exactness of science to his search for authenticity and his constant need for meaning, it could be said that he is, as Stacey Olster explains, "a modernist in postmodern clothing" (89). This serves as a sharp contrast between his psyche and his reality, and conversely, between the old world that he would like to see survive and the current times. We can see his fondness of simplicity in statements such as: "I like clearing my arm from the folds of the garment to look at my watch. The simple act of checking the time is transformed by this flourish. Decorative gestures add romance to a life" (DeLillo 19). This indicates a neurotic attachment to the past and a nostalgia that leads to alienation. Jack Gladney, "a character whose vocabulary is punctuated by references to God and human soul, is a compendium of nostalgic longings" (Olster

81). From his position of outsider, Jack's incessant efforts to detect meaning are ultimately met with disappointment for, in postmodernity, everything is deconstructed, and inflated hopes of a life filled with symbolism are blown apart by the randomness of nihilism. Paul Maltby states: "In all modes of fiction, it is postmodern that is least hospitable to concepts like insight and intuition" (221).

Jack interprets everything as a sign from a higher plane. When his daughter Steffie murmured something in her sleep in the shelter where they congregated to escape the toxic cloud, he immediately drew himself closer, determined to find in her mumbles, a message that would relieve his fear. He says "I sat there watching her. Moments later she spoke again. Distinct syllables this time, not some dreamy murmur—but a language not quite of this world. I struggled to understand. I was convinced she was saying something, fitting together units of stable meaning." (DeLillo 171). Instead of a metaphysical revelation, her words spelled "Toyota Celica", a mere brand name she had heard many times on TV. Even as he realizes that his daughter was merely repeating empty words her mind had been bombarded with during her semi-conscious connection to television (a topic recurrent throughout the novel), Jack still wishes to feel something. He continues: "A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more. The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky, tablet-carved in cuneiform. It made me feel that something hovered" (172). Somewhere in these episodes, one can clearly see Jack's desperate search for the sublime. This feeling he seeks is "a combinatory feeling of simultaneous fear and fascination, repulsion and attraction, and horror and

admiration that is caused by an overwhelming and confounding phenomenon” (Pirajmuddin 177-178). Instead, he is always brought back to the mundane, the meaningless.

Another example of this starvation for awe-producing experiences is the visit of his father-in-law, Vernon Dickey. After another instance of night fright, Jack detects a presence on the front porch, an old man sitting in a wicker chair and giving his back to the window. Jack immediately descends into a spiral of death-related symbols, willingly avoiding the clarity of knowing who he was, and preferring to bathe in his own whimsical interpretations. He begins: “I saw him in profile in the uncertain light, motionless and knowing. Was he as old as I’d first thought—or was the white hair purely emblematic, part of his allegorical force? That was it, of course. He would be Death, or Death’s errand-runner, a hollow-eyed technician from the plague era, from the era of inquisitions, endless wars, of bedlams and leprosariums...” (DeLillo 260-261). After taking an abundant dose of fear-warding antidotes in the form of watching his family sleep and carrying a copy of *Mein Kampf*¹ that serves as a talisman that grants the grandeur of its author, Jack finally meets the mysterious figure. His dreams of a symbol-charged encounter die as he realizes that the old man was simply Babette’s father who chose to wait for the morning lest he disturbs the family’s sleep. This pattern is repeated throughout the novel, “When DeLillo’s characters encounter the postmodern sublime, they are deflated and emptied only to realize that there is nothing empowering to be filled with: the possibility of self-assertion is gone for good” (Pirajmuddin 187).

¹ Adolf Hitler’s autobiographical manifesto published in 1925 in which he describes his political ideology.

The postmodern world is then hostile to these modernist and sometimes romantic interpretations of the world and there are clear reasons for it. Jack shows that “his quest for transcendental meaning seem oddly out of place in the postmodern world” (Wilcox 100) but also demonstrates why it is the case. A deeper exploration of his world is sufficient to understand the forces at play and the cultural elements that seem to fend off meaning and replace it with absurdity.

Don DeLillo lived, like his character Jack, in unprecedented times where representations of reality exceeded direct experiences. The television, though a part of the American family well before the advent of postmodernism, became ever more present in the daily lives, and most importantly in the consciousness, of the common man. Popular culture, through cinema and music placed celebrities on a throne and captivated the public imagination. In *White Noise*, for example, we can see Elvis Presley taught at university alongside Hitler as an equally valid shaper of history. We can see Alfonse Stompanato, the chairman of American Environment Studies at the college-on-the-hill urging his colleges, in what seems to be an academic discussion between professors, to recollect their exact whereabouts and what they were doing on the day of James Dean’s death. It is done in a “threatening voice” that painted the death of a movie star as a crucial moment of history that must be etched in the memories of all Americans. The result of this overattachment to means of copying reality is the loss of all sense of authenticity. The mind started remembering images of life more than life itself. In other words, Jack and his contemporaries, at least in their minds, lived in a simulation. In the absence of truth, his hopes to encounter meaning were met with a copy of it, like Steffie’s dreams that only replayed the words of a TV

advertisement. Paul Maltby explains: “Romantic and modernist conceptions of visionary moments -typically premised on metaphysical assumptions of supernatural truth- are rendered obsolete in a culture suffused in simulacra” (214).

A simulacrum here, represents anything that replaces authentic experience with an aestheticized, superficial representation of it. Don DeLillo utilized this medium to the fullest in an attempt to satirize his culture’s addiction to images. The confusion between reality and simulacra is repeated, albeit absurdly, with the SIMUVAC, a disaster simulation unit that evacuates Blacksmith after the toxic cloud had spread. When Jack asks about the SIMUVAC’s function, a young man with an armband replies that they were using this crisis as a way to train for their drills. Jack was puzzled by the clear reversal of reality. He asked: “A form of practice? Are you saying you saw a chance to use the real event in order to rehearse the simulation?” (DeLillo 156). The strangeness of the situation serves to hyperbolize the thinning of the line that separates reality from imitation. John Frow notes: “It is thus no longer possible to distinguish meaningfully between a generality embedded in life and a generality embedded in representation of life” (38).

Perhaps the best example of the simulacra in the novel is The Most Photographed Barn in America. Murray Siskind, Jack’s colleague and friend (the word “friend” here is used loosely since he does not have Jack’s best interest in mind), takes him to see a popular tourist attraction, a picturesque barn made famous by photographers. Before reaching their location, they find themselves flooded by signs and advertisements that seem to indicate that the barn was no longer famous for itself but for the many representations of it. Murray, who comes up as an interpreter

of his culture, notes that “Once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn” (DeLillo 22). The “aura” of the place is dictated by its images. One can no longer have any authentic appreciation of the place without a reference to some brightly colored magazine or a gigantic billboard. All around them, they could see people with cameras and tripods all pointed at the barn, enforcing the detachment from the real object, and engrossed in the “mechanical”, man-made image of it. Murray cleverly adds: “They are taking pictures of taking pictures” (23). This pattern, though illustrated well in this passage, is replicated many times in the novel because “In *White Noise*, DeLillo’s protagonist Jack Gladney confronts a new order in which life is increasingly lived in a world of simulacra, where images and electronic representations replace direct experience” (Wilcox 97).

Despite being alienated, Jack remains a product of his culture. And since he stubbornly refuses to take charge of his life for fear of being made aware of its linearity that leads to death, Jack finds himself replicating its most confusing aspect. Like the barn or Steffie’s lucid dream, he loses authenticity and embraces a false image of himself. He lets go, at least in appearance, of Jack and embraces the J.A.K persona.

Well before the age of social media where people construct a false enhanced version of themselves to entice people’s admiration, Jack Gladney wears a carefully crafted mask that hides his limitations and presents him as a more competent man. It is important to note that in addition to his alienation, Jack is self-conscious and aware of his mediocrity. At work, he teaches Hitler studies in a department where everyone except him speaks German. Though he created the department, he realizes that his

fame is not fully linked to his skills but to the allure of the Hitler figure to which he latches on. As a father, he presents none of the guidance and authority that his role traditionally dictates and often receives knowledge from his children rather than delivering it. Finally, as a husband, he drew all his comfort from Babette who seemed uncorrupted by the conspiratory tendencies of his ex-wives, only to discover that she had been having an affair with a mysterious man. Jack, already suffering from a crisis of masculinity through his lack of authority and physical strength, finds himself not only betrayed but unable to avenge his pride even after obtaining a pistol and embarking on a vengeful journey. As a whole, and even before his wife's infidelity, Jack had been feeling insignificant, an imposter in a world he barely understood, "...he is a charlatan, in brief, and unfortunate enough to realize it" (Conroy 157). It is from this painful realization that the J.A.K persona is born.

Weary of his inability to live up to the strength of his Hitler, Jack started simulating it. His name was transformed, following the university Chancellor's suggestion, from the ordinary, harmless Jack to a more mysterious J.A.K. He also started gaining weight to appear physically imposing and to match, though only superficially, the grandeur of his subject that he needed to "grow into". He wore thick dark glasses and walked around campus in a black academic gown that imitated the style of ancient scholars. Jack felt that his professional importance relied partially on his disguise. When he rationalized the idea of why his ignorance of the German language should remain hidden, he says: "Because I'd achieved high professional standing, because my lectures were well attended and my articles printed in the major journals, because I wore an academic gown and dark glasses day and night whenever

I was on campus, because I carried two hundred and thirty pounds on a six-foot three-inch frame and had big hands and feet, I knew my German lessons would have to be secret.” (DeLillo 43-44). The protagonist understood that much of what he had achieved was a result of genuine work but he also saw the image that he had projected to the public as part of it. Reality and simulacra merged into one persona. Moreover, Hitler represented something bigger, more lasting, beyond death. As long as he was associated with him in name, achievement and appearance, he would be touching the same transcendence that might lift beyond the realm of mortality. In a discussion with his daughter Denise, he explains:

So Hitler gave me something to grow into and develop toward, tentative as I have sometimes been in the effort. The glasses with thick black heavy frames and dark lenses were my own idea, an alternative to the bushy beard that my wife of the period didn't want me to grow. Babette said she liked the series J. A. K. and didn't think it was attention-getting in a cheap sense. To her it intimated dignity, significance and prestige.

I am the false character that follows the name around. (27)

From this passage, his feeling of being a “false character” is made transparent. He is well aware that he became no more than a mimic of his desired self and it sinks him further into his alienation. Mark Conroy explains that “The protagonist’s self-awareness is precisely what makes his fakery especially painful” (157). It is also important to note that his disguise caused more issues than solutions. His dark glasses worsened his faulty vision and made him see “colored dots” at the edge of his eyes.

His extra weight made him tired and out of breath whenever he had to run. He struggled with his German lessons, symbolizing his difficulty to fit into his persona. Finally, his doubts made him seek and absorb Murray Siskind's ideas like a naïve student in search of a mentor.

Despite the clear failure of this mask to elevate his mood or status, Jack was too attached to the comfort it provided. Like the most photographed barn in America, images and representations, no matter how false, are made indivisible from reality. When he is told of his exposure to Nyodine D, the toxic chemical released from a derailed train, his fear makes him long for the air of composure that his costume provided: "I wanted my academic gown and dark glasses" (DeLillo 159).

Jack's weakness and vulnerability when separated from the J.A.K persona is reinforced by the encounter of a colleague while shopping with his family. Massingale could not help but notice that Jack was barely recognizable, "You're a different person altogether" (99) he remarks. Yet, it is not the change that was more notable but the "smallness" and unimportance he projected. Massingale proceeds to utter a sentence that shattered Jack's already fragile self-worth. He says: "You look so harmless, Jack. A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy" (99). This remark, though met with feigned indifference, deeply affected Jack who went on an uncontrolled shopping spree to soothe his deflated ego.

The overreliance on images, representations and disguises transformed Don DeLillo's world into one governed by simulacra, where reality and imitation are indistinguishable. Jack's search for authentic self-hood was made impossible by his fake persona, and his search for genuine insights was met with monitored projections

of television and popular culture. Yet, one can still detect a desire for spirituality as a way of finding meaning. Here again, we are confronted with a society where the traditional divine is absent, and a number of empty false deities are erected in its stead.

2.3. The Loss of Spirituality and the Void Left in its Wake

The world of *White Noise* is one devoid of a clear link to the divine. The prevalence of science overshadows all forms of traditional spirituality and the church, commonly a symbol of guidance and reconnection with God, has been hijacked by more worldly pursuits. When Babette goes to a Congregational church, it is not to repent or attend a sermon. She instead descends to the basement where she teaches posture correction exercises to a group of elderly people. Here, she alludes to certain transcendental traditions, “She makes references to yoga, kendo, trance-walking. She talks of Sufi dervishes, Sherpa mountaineers” (DeLillo 38) but not as a way of reestablishing a sense of spirituality. The old folk are not seeking salvation. They want to regain an aspect of their youth betraying their attachment to life. They also do not show any reluctance to accept any of the concepts she presents. Jack remarks: “Nothing is foreign, nothing too remote to apply. I am always surprised at their acceptance and trust, the sweetness of their belief” (38). This readiness to accept does not only reveal their naivety but also an absence of strongly-anchored personal beliefs. Since nothing is certain, all option, no matter how foreign, are equally valid.

Later in the novel, DeLillo further explores the lack of spirituality by reverting once again to the absurd. When Jack is treated by a nun after he exchanged gunfire with Willie Mink in his surge to avenge his wounded masculinity, he decides to engage in a conversation about religion. To his astonishment, sister Hemann Marie dismisses his questions saying “You would have a head so dumb to believe this?” (338). Worse than disbelief, the nun explains that her faith is only a façade, a performance piece for the lost souls who seek someone to appease their uncertainties. Religion as truth was also superseded by simulacra. She explains: “Our pretense is a dedication. Someone must appear to believe. Our lives are no less serious than if we professed real faith, real belief. As belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that *someone* believe” (339). At this point, it is clear that the world of *White Noise* has no place for genuine spirituality making it even harder to find meaning. As Martin Esslin states, “Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (qtd. in Slocombe 203).

In the hope of perceiving a glimpse of transcendence, the inhabitants of Blacksmith turn towards other methods. They engage in other forms of belief that promise to fill the void left by the death of religion. One method is drowning into the tabloids that explore the supernatural, conspirations and all forms of sensational news that simulate a sense of awe-inducing sublime. The supermarket shelves are filled with such tabloids, and when Babette volunteers to read for old man Treadwell, she only uses them as material. Paul Maltby suggests that they are a form of alternative to religion. He writes: “In *White Noise*, the tabloids are seen to function as a concealed

form of religious expression, where extraterrestrials are substituted for messiahs and freakish happenings for miracles. In short, on a wavelength of which we are virtually unconscious, the tabloids gratify our impulses towards the transcendental” (221). Faith-like belief was not necessary because the interest lied in reproducing (or simulating) sensations. Anything that moves the soul away from the mundane reality of life and its impending end could serve as a form of substitute to religion regardless of how false or absurd it may be. An example of this need to fill the spiritual void is Murray Siskind’s suggestion. In order to counter the fear of death, he proposes to “Read up on reincarnation, transmigration, hyper-space, the resurrection of the dead and so on. Some gorgeous systems have evolved from these beliefs” (DeLillo 305). Belief here is meaningless as long as the mind is absorbed in something that emulates transcendence. The appearance is sublime but the core is empty. As long as there is no reliance on truth or solid faith, the descent towards meaninglessness is inevitable: “The waning of metaphysical belief has hallowed the sublime of its traditional transcendental substance; the nothingness that reign at the heart of this hollow sublime is ultimately related to the concept of nihilism” (Pirnajmuddin 185).

Beside the far-fetched stories of the tabloids, two other forces, closely related, took the center of people’s lives as self-proclaimed deities: television, and scientism/technocracy. These elements mimicked the divine, not only by inspiring awe, but also by controlling the masses and standing as all-knowing providers of guidance.

2.3.1. Television as a Deceiving Minerva

The controlling and mediating effects of television were prophesied by George Orwell in 1948, but forcing citizens to sit before their sets or perform physical exercises under the gaze of the ever-watching eye of Big Brother presented the medium as an authoritative, almost military medium that the protagonist hoped to escape. That was a vision more associated with the totalitarianism of the author's time than the subtle mind control of postmodernism. Don DeLillo, on the other hand, saw TV as a moderator of taste and opinion that projected images that nested subconsciously in all his characters, making it impossible to formulate a thought without the influence of some scenes from an advertisement or a film. In many ways, DeLillo compared television to a deity that controls the free will of its subjects, first by saying that it is "always on hence omnipresent" (Olster 81); a divine quality. Second, by cleverly referring to it as "the voice upstairs" (DeLillo 244), a distortion of a common appellation of God. Evidently, television is not the only voice that overwhelms the characters with its messages. Jack and his family are also seen obeying the commands of the radio or flocking towards a loud speaker. Le Clair notes that "The characters of *White Noise* consume sounds as they consume supermarket products" (27). They are always seeking a disembodied voice descending upon them like a revelation holding some secret wisdom. Yet, the television, being at the center of the postmodern family, is more prone to control. As Murray Siskind explains: "For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set. If a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is" (DeLillo 82).

In his 1997 novel, *Underworld*, Don DeLillo states: “Whoever controls your eyeball, controls the world” (241) and the veracity of this statement can be seen throughout *White Noise*. Jack’s daughters are a prime example of such control. After coming home from a shopping spree, Jack catches Steffie in the middle of an indoctrination session in which she sat, glued to the TV, mimicking the words in a robotic manner: “She moved her lips, attempting to match the words as they were spoken” (101). Oblivious of its effects, Jack merely observes the scene, giving it no further thought. However, when the toxic cloud threatens the inhabitants of Blacksmith, and television becomes the sole provider of guidance, Steffie and Denise exhibit the signs of their brain washing. Whenever a symptom of the toxic event is mentioned on TV, the girls immediately start feeling it. From sweaty palms to nausea to feelings of déjà vu, they physically developed the ailments described to them by the omnipresent voice. Whenever a symptom is refuted, it magically ceases to afflict them. Their brother Heinrich, a somewhat unconventional figure within the family, was the only one who appeared to be aware of such control. When his sisters suffered from the “wrong” symptom, he turned to his father and said: “There’s been a correction...Tell them they ought to be throwing up” (127). Reality, even in the form of physical sensations, was no longer able to be experienced authentically without the interference of television.

The commands of television are not contested because the medium holds an aura of sanctity replacing that of religion. When Babette’s teaching of posture etiquette was covered by a local cable station, the family was mesmerized by her image that seemed ethereal. The words spoken or the essence of this apparition was of

no importance to them, “It was the picture that mattered, the face in black and white, animated but also flat, distanced, sealed off, timeless. It was but wasn’t her” (122). They watched her in silence with Jack trying to shake off all the superstition he linked to the medium, “I tried to tell myself it was only television—whatever that was, however it worked —and not some journey out of life or death, not some mysterious separation” (122). Evidently, that feeling could not be suppressed since the TV had already established itself as a deity, a goddess of wisdom and/or deception. The author likened the family’s reaction to Babette’s screen appearance to a religious ritual suggesting that “He [DeLillo] sketches a similarity between the rites of primitive tribes and the way a postmodern family expects blessing with the appearance of TV’s images on the screen in a post-industrial country” (Najjzadeha 270).

Returning to the idea of simulacra, one can easily see how television, with its semi-religion power to inspire obedience, succeeded in replacing authentic experiences by the images it projects. In other words, to think of reality, one had to refer back to a “TV moment”. Experience becomes “...a mediated form of reality: the reel, not the real” (Slocombe 238). When walking around his sleeping children and adjusting their blankets, Jack remarks: “I looked for a blanket to adjust, a toy to remove from a child’s warm grasp, feeling I’d wandered into a TV moment” (DeLillo 261). Through overrepresentations, reality seems to imitate a simulacrum and not the other way around. When comparing his fear of death to great heroes of the past, Jack thinks of Attila the Hun. Here again, instead of deriving his reference from historical sources or pure personal imagination, his mind immediately turns to the “reel” saying:

“I want to believe he lay in his tent, wrapped in animal skins, as in some internationally financed movie epic...” (116). Television, instead of providing genuine knowledge, feeds the mind with fantasies, “for the very vehicle that enables us to apprehend the world through visual images ends up replacing the history of that world with a set of consumable images, representations divorced from their referents...” (Olster 80).

It is undeniable that television nested in the minds of the characters of *White Noise*, replacing their reality by mediated images, and robbing them from the possibility of authentic experiences. However, Jack Gladney’s search for meaning was hindered by more serious effects of the medium, namely the overrepresentation and aestheticization of reality.

In the same way that a dopamine-inducing substance loses its effect over time and continuous usage, a feeling or an image that has been over-reproduced ends up losing its value. The best example of this banalization of concepts that would otherwise be charged with meaning in that of Hitler. Jack, who is dependent on the Nietzschean power of the dictator, and a so-called connoisseur of the subject, admits that “He’s always on. We wouldn’t have television without him” (DeLillo 79) and that is not without consequence. The once feared Fuhrer, the personification of evil in the Western imagination, lost all his ability to shock or amaze. He was reduced to the order of the mundane, a meaningless topic that grew too familiar to demand any particular interest. Paul Cantor notes: “This surprising transformation of the once willful tyrant into someone reliable is the result of the increasing familiarity and reproductivity of his image in the marketplace. Through the power of the media,

representations of Hitler have proliferated and permeated every corner of the twentieth-century-life” (Cantor 57). Hitler became a household name, securing an eternal place on television and the minds of its viewers but without his original significance. It is then no exaggeration to confirm that, at least partially, “[t]he loss of meaning is directly linked to the dissolving, dissuasive action of information, the media and mass media” (Baudrillard 55).

Another theme that the novel revolves around is that of disasters. Even before the toxic spill that sent the town into mass panic, the Gladney family was fascinated by watching calamities unfold elsewhere, away from the comfort of their “untouchable” home. Unlike the real threat that drew Jack closer to death by exposing him to Nyodine D, the images of crashes and earthquakes depicted on TV were enhanced by technology and presented as both sublime (thus awe-inspiring for the spiritually-starved postmodern family) and distant, detaching them from their dangerous and often tragic sense. The Gladneys devoured those images, made closer to fiction than reality, and anticipated them like a family show or an exclusive film. Blind to all the death and pain the real events caused, “they look beyond the violence and human suffering of disaster and see only aestheticized forms, enhanced by repetition and technological innovations, such as slow-motion, stop action, and frame-by-frame imagery of plane crashes” (Duvall 174). The family did not take pleasure in the suffering of others but, like a drug addict seeking a stronger kick, they hungered for more brutal, more grandiose events to be aired. Jack admits: “We were otherwise silent, watching houses slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a

mass of advancing lava. Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping” (DeLillo 79-80).

The first reason for this perverse fascination is the apathy that TV consumers developed from the flood of information that numbs their minds. As Jack’s colleague and head of the department of American Environments notes, “because we’re suffering from brain fade. We need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information” (81). Disasters are then nothing more than a surge of dopamine to fire up the anesthetized synapses. The second reason is that TV, as seen earlier, does not only cover events as they are. It beautifies them, exaggerates, adds commentary to grab the viewers’ attention in the same way that serial killers are becoming today the subjects of documentaries and movies that glorify them and transform them into genius antiheroes. The dramatization of life adds to the sense of nihilism because “with each screen transposition further aestheticizing reality, reality becomes increasingly drained of meaning to the same degree” (Olster 84).

Television in *White Noise* plays a crucial role in shaping the minds of the characters. While they devotedly listen to its commands seeking guidance and meaning, the returning waves only fill them with more confusion. It robs them from a sense of authentic experience, banalizes even the most cleaving subjects and drains reality from its meaning through projections of beautiful yet empty replicas of it. Television is not the only deceiving force in the novel. Science and Technology, the new guardians of truth that usurped the place of religion, also prove incapable of producing the meaning that Jack and his contemporaries seek.

2.3.2. Science and Technology as Impotent Deities

Divorced from all sense of an all-powerful divine, the characters of *White Noise* are constantly latching to concepts that provide them with a semblant of certainty. Science and technology, being the basis of the creed of “rational” societies, act as providers of information and interpreters of the world. As such, they are raised to the rank of divinities, Gods of wisdom that the masses in search of a guidance bow to. Throughout the novel, we can see many examples of this allegiance to technology. When Jack checks his balance electronically, the response of the screen appeared to him like an answer to his prayers. He confirms that it was not the assurance of the sum he had that appeased him but rather the connection he felt with the machine. He says: “The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city. What a pleasing interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed” (DeLillo 60). The religious connotations in this passage are clear. The “system” is associated to being watched over by an all-loving God. Later in the novel, when he is diagnosed by a SIMUVAC specialist, Jack feels that his salvation (in this case the hope of being spared from death caused by his exposure to toxins) rested with the man who had access to the computer; the all-knowing machine. To him, that man was “today’s soothsayer with his computerized crystal ball” (Weinstein 140). He immediately put his entire faith in him and admitted: “I wanted this man on my side. He had access to data. I was prepared to be servile and fawning if it would keep him from dropping casually shattering remarks about my degree of exposure and chances for survival” (DeLillo

155). Blessing and servitude are usually associated with religion and by elevating the computer to a rank of provider of absolute truth, Jack had unintentionally made technology into a new one. The sole idea of believing that the medium detained complete knowledge can be sufficient to maintain this argument because “In attributing truth to any methodology, we make a nonrational commitment; in effect, we perform an act of faith” (Polanyi qtd. in Le Clair 25). To paint a complete picture, we can say that technology’s place as a deity was established because it inspired faith, answered prayers, provided knowledge and commanded obedience and servitude. Yet, like television, it proved to be an additional false idol for it provided none of the meaning or comfort that Jack and his family needed.

The first thing that this overreliance on science and technology caused was the devaluation of human lives. Man’s thoughts became an amalgamation of random signals that circulate between the neurons. Actions, decision, passions and aspirations were reduced to a machine-like flipping of switches detached from any human will. Heinrich, Jack’s son who was consumed by postmodern scientism, was asked if he wanted to travel with his mother for the summer. His answer was: “I can’t control what happens in my brain, so how can I be sure what I want to do ten seconds from now, much less Montana next summer? It’s all this activity in the brain and you don’t know what’s you as a person and what’s some neuron that just happens to fire or just happens to misfire” (DeLillo 59). This response that betrays the indecisiveness and nihilistic indifference of his era also shows that scientism was “an entire philosophy of the human being as automaton, as complex biotechnical entity ruled by forces unknown and ungovernable” (Weinstein 136). Besides being moved by uncontrollable

brain signals, man's existence was also transcribed as a series of data and statistics. The computer's binary world reduced individuals to lists and numbers. In front of the specialist with "the computerized crystal ball", Jack's hope for a comprehensible explanation was met with this reply: "Your genetics, your personals, your medicals, your psychologicals, your police-and-hospitals. It comes back pulsing stars. This doesn't mean anything is going to happen to you as such, at least not today or tomorrow. It just means you are the sum total of your data. No man escapes that" (DeLillo 158). Jack's hopes for a meaningful existence that transcends his mortality was deflated further with this statement.

The computer, with its new power to contain all the important details of human life within a few pulsing stars and numbers, was then unable to provide any of the certainties Jack needed. In the same way, the reliance on scientific method produced nothing but the subjugation of the masses who regarded these forces as all-knowing entities able to save their lives. With statements like "the system had blessed my life" and the trance-like fascination with Babette's image on television, we can also see that instead of rationality, technology caused a reemergence of superstition. As Conroy explains, "If anything, the scientific advance directly on display in this world [...] reduces the people further to infantilism, primitive fantasy, and dependence upon the system as if upon a deity" (Conroy 160). While the miraculous progress of the era made life more comfortable for the body, the soul on the other hand starved for meaning since the view of man as an 'automaton' denied its very existence. As for the concept of objective truth, it vanished in the sea of incessant, ever changing and often contradictory information. Jack Gladney brilliantly explains

the chaos caused by technology saying: “A victory for uncertainty, randomness and chaos. Science’s finest hour” (DeLillo 34).

With technocrats as shepherds and television as their mouthpiece, the people of *White Noise* became avid consumers of moderated information. Yet, because of the experimental nature of science, the news they receive are always subject to change. When the train crashed releasing its toxic content in the air, for example, the smoke that was seen by the inhabitant of Blacksmith was called a “feathery plume”. Heinrich, the only one who could sense the confusion that these words caused remarked: “like a shapeless growing thing. A dark black breathing thing of smoke. Why do they call it a plume?” (126). As soon as people started designating the event with this name, it was immediately changed to “A black billowing cloud” (128), suggesting a certain amplitude to the event. Shortly after, the name changed once more into the more cataclysmic yet vague appellation “The airborne toxic event” (132). This pattern was repeated in many places in the novel, like the rapidly changing symptoms that Jack’s daughters experienced, or the effectiveness of the Dylar, the experimental drug that meant to suppress the fear of death. When information becomes so illusory, it is only natural that people would either remain subject to it and thus have their lives colored with the same uncertainty and randomness, or reject it altogether, claiming that an ever-changing truth is no truth at all. Heinrich, still dissatisfied with the news he had been fed, unknowingly adopts the premise of Epistemological Nihilism which claims that knowledge is unachievable. He expresses his frustration saying: “What good is knowledge if it just floats in the air? It goes from

computer to computer. It changes and grows every second of every day. But nobody actually knows anything” (165).

In addition to being unreliable, the opinions that the masses have to abide by are also often contradictory. This results in the dismantlement of the concept of truth that plunges the world further into nihilism. As Jean Baudrillard explains, “We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning” (55). At this point, one can easily understand why Jack would still place his faith in science and technology. His main motive is his fear of death and the allure of those concepts resides in their alleged capacity to alleviate or entirely save from such pain. Yet, instead of providing a refuge from death, the scientific advancements of the era caused more of it in the form of toxic spills and brain-damaging pills (one of Dylar’s side effects). It appears that “[s]ociety’s greatest weapon for warding off death is technology, but we have here a vision of technology gone amok: computers that replace our history with pulsing stars and bracketed numbers, toxins that escape from a great Norse death ship and threatens entire communities, medications such as Dylar that are intended to eradicate the fear of death but instead give rise to death plots of their own” (Weinstein 143). In the novel, we can see this awareness develop in Murray Siskind who says: “every advance in knowledge and technique is matched by a new kind of death, a new strain” (DeLillo 167).

Even when it doesn’t actively create disasters, it constantly reminds man of his fragility and his pitiful state as a deficient machine. Despite being treated as a deity, technology proves to be an impotent one because “Ironically, while technology has the potential to save humans and enhance life, what it seems more commonly to do is

frighten and alienate us from our own (frail) bodies” (Helyer 135). This goes in direct contradiction with the redeeming promise of traditional spirituality. Religion in particular sees the human as primarily a soul that outlives the body, a concept that, regardless of its veracity, brings both comfort and meaning to life and suffering. Science, with its reliance on empirical evidence cannot speak of unverified claims such as the existence of the soul or its ascension to heaven (or descent to hell). As such, death is portrayed as a void, a mere shutting off of an organic system; an idea that aggravates our primitive fear of death. Mark Conroy argues that “Science by its nature cannot provide the promise of immortality that earlier stories, always implicitly religious regardless of their specific lineage, were once able to render” (Conroy 160).

The loss of traditional spirituality has left a void that could not be replaced by neither science nor television. Despite being hailed as the sole providers of guidance, they left the characters of *White Noise* marooned in a sea of ever-changing and contradictory information that pushed them to question the very notion of truth. Authentic experiences were replaced by simulacra and the search for meaning was deflated by constant references to consumerist images. The faith that Jack and his contemporaries placed on these new powers was futile because a genuine meaning that transcends death was lost when religion and spirituality were forgotten and superseded with mere counterfeits such as tabloids and sensational TV programs that simulate the feeling of the Sublime. These impotent deities, by providing knowledge to the masses proved the collapse of another value, that of wisdom. The characters of *White Noise*, despite being educated and living in a college-town, appear to be unable to produce original ideas without the influence of television and popular culture. The

family and the university, as traditional centers of guidance and instruction, also failed to restore meaning to the concept of wisdom and succumbed to the devaluing influence of postmodern culture.

2.4.The Fall of Wisdom: the Failure of the Family and the University to Provide Meaning and Guidance

White Noise is narrated by a university professor and the head of a department he created. This premise posits a potential of deep insight and understanding. Yet, the novel is filled with false promises and all powers are portrayed as weak copies, relics of a bygone era. Jack Gladney, as seen earlier, is disguised as a scholar. His aura mostly comes from the image he constructed, and the appeal of his classes is derived from the reputation of his subject rather than genuine expertise. German, an essential language in his field, is far beyond his reach and we rarely see him read anything of value. Books, as the primary source of knowledge, are scarcely mentioned. Jack always carries a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* with him but it appears to be used as a lucky charm to fend off the fear of death more than an academic tool. For instance, we see him grab it when he mistakes the shadowy figure of his father-in-law for the angel of death. The other volumes he owns are discarded with other unused household items, "Where are the books? Shoved in Gladney's list, ignominiously between boots, stationery, sheets, pillows, and quilts. Whatever their title (no doubt best not to know them), these books are things like other things, commodities..." (Lentricchia 80). Books are treated as trivial possessions devoid of their primary function and akin to any other belonging that time has rendered useless. The other professors in the

novel are no better than Jack. Murray Siskind mockingly remarks that "...there are full professors in this place who read nothing but cereal boxes" (DeLillo 20). The guardians of knowledge, the shapers of educated young minds are not readers and thus unqualified for passing down wisdom. Siskind, despite having regressive solutions to the questions of being (as will be explained later), is at least able to generate thought and interpret the world, and we see Jack often turn to him in search of explanations. Yet, even Siskind admits that his readings are as empty as the others. He says: "I read the TV listings, I read the ads in *Ufologist Today*" (29). He justifies his interest in TV and the supernatural by claiming that they are cultural signals that must be looked at with interest. He continues "I want to immerse myself in American magic and dread" (29). It is true that those elements represent the mindset of the people around him and by studying them, he would gain insight into the world he moved to. However, it also betrays the superficiality of his understanding. Jack's "guru", like the other representatives of knowledge, is portrayed as a fraud, unable to pick up a "real" book.

The conversations that the highly qualified instructors have also validate the shallowness of their scope. They engage in a *bras-de-fer* to prove who is the most faithful representative of the frivolity of popular culture by relating the times they urinated in sinks and washed their teeth with their fingers (82-83). Their speech is punctuated by references to movie stars and celebrities such as John Garfield and Marilyn Monroe who occupy their interest more than authors and scientists. Through these conversations, it is clear that "the university in *White Noise* is presented as trivialized by the nostalgic study of popular and youth culture" (LeClair 07). The

courses that are taught in the college-on-the-hill also confirm such trivialization. Murray Siskind presented lectures on Elvis Presley's life before being offered to teach "the cinema of car crashes". An important thing to note is that, to make his lecture on Elvis more legitimate, Siskind asked Jack to join his class, have a few remarks and draw similarities with Hitler. The result was a joint lecture where the two professors danced around the lives of both figures, explaining their relationship with their mothers and their vision of death. The audience was mesmerized by the whirlwind of information that melted the historical symbol and the rock-and-roll idol into one. This did not only demonstrate the power that both the dictator and the celebrity have on the imagination of the masses in search of a hero. It also destroyed the idea of "high culture" by treating these radically different people as equally worthy of academic discourse. Jack noticed the effect of such association by saying: "I had been generous with the power and madness at my disposal, allowing my subject to be associated with an infinitely lesser figure, a fellow who sat in La-Z-Boy chairs and shot out TVs" (DeLillo 89). Elevating Elvis to the position of Hitler shows that "In DeLillo's work, it might be argued, there is a refusal to distinguish between media culture and high culture, a refusal to discriminate or to exclude" (Boxall 44). While this attitude might be harmless in the minds of common men, to be done in university is to risk the devaluing of the very authority of such establishment. In trivializing lectures, university is itself trivialized and loses its power to dictate wisdom.

Paul A. Cantor argues that there is a direct link between the spread of postmodernism in American society and the university that played the role of provider of knowledge. He explains: "It is a curious fact that postmodernism as a cultural

phenomenon has coincided with the era in which the university has come to play an increasingly dominant role in culture life, as a patron, as arbiter of taste, and as interpreter of meaning to the general public” (Cantor 58). This idea suggests that university was, at least partially, the cause of such phenomenon. In the same way, one might argue that the loss of meaning, the dismantlement of high culture, and the embracing of nihilism was similarly influenced by it. In DeLillo’s world, the semi-illiterate professors with their fascination with youth culture and their lectures on car crashes and movie stars certainly illustrate this point. Additionally, university, much like television, adds to the dulling down of important ideas through overrepresentation and banalization. Hitler, once again, can serve as an example.

It is very clear that the postmodern world has renounced the concept of absolute truth in favor of relativism. Disciples of this intellectual current question everything including their very senses as we can see with Heinrich who says: “Our senses are wrong a lot more often than they’re right. This has been proved in the laboratory. Don’t you know about all those theorems that say nothing is what it seems? There’s no past, present or future outside our own mind. The so-called laws of motion are a big hoax” (DeLillo 33). Yet, a few topics seemed able to escape such thinking and maintain their unmistakable qualities. One such topic is Hitler who, for the majority of people in the West, represents the personification of wickedness and murderous dictatorship, “In a world where absolute is now generally thought to be relative, Hitler often seems to stand as the lone remaining absolute; the incarnation of absolute evil” (Cantor 51). In *White Noise*, however, the domesticated image of the dictator made him too familiar to keep his radical connotations. Hitler’s name loses its

meaning with the overrepresentations in lectures, articles and journals that the university indifferently produces, in the same way that television numbs viewers' sensibility towards him with the overload of images it constantly projects. The result is that "In Gladney's world, Hitler appears to be just another subject of academic discourse, arousing no special passions" (Cantor 57). University, in DeLillo's view, does not only fail to produce constructive thought without the influence of popular culture, but it also transforms emotion-inducing subjects that were once packed with meaning into quotidian, lackluster study materials. As Cantor notes, "DeLillo captures perfectly the style of college catalogues, which can turn the most exciting subject into something prosaic and banal" (7).

With professors engrossed in youthful nostalgia devoid of any intellectual effort, lectures that revolve around the image-heavy world of television, and writings robbing weighty subjects of their original meaning, the postmodern university failed in its primary role of producing wisdom. It is no wonder that, to understand the world, the characters of *White Noise* turn to television and tabloids instead of academics and books. Professors themselves are submissive to any force that might fill their existential void like the obsession with celebrities and rock-stars displayed by Alfonse Stompanato and his colleagues. Jack Gladney's life, however, is not centered around his career. His family, as his refuge and antidote to meaninglessness, provides a potential for transcendental wisdom. As the initial source of learning and instruction, it might have preserved an uncorrupted approach to life and thus provided its members with unmoderated wisdom. Yet, DeLillo's pessimistic analysis of American culture painted a picture of a family that was not spared by the nihilism of its time.

In *White Noise*, most of the exchange of information happens around the family. News about the toxic event were first related by Jack's son who was perched on the attic's window, and the symptoms were revealed by his daughters' behavior. The discovery of Babette's Dylar was made by Denise who engaged in a plot with her father to uncover the secret of the mysterious tablets. However, the Gladney family only reacts to events and relays information already revealed by the screen that can always be heard echoing fragmented speech around the house. When discussing facts in the car, the family only repeats vague recollections of what was once heard on the news or watched in a movie. They contradict each other and affirm misinformation like identifying Dakar as a country or a name of a character, and mistaking tsunamis for origamis (DeLillo 96-97). Jack was aware that despite the confidence that his wife and children showed in demonstrating their knowledge, no true wisdom can ever be drawn from their constant brouhaha. He remarks: "The family is the cradle of the world's misinformation. There must be something in family life that generates factual error. Overcloseness, the noise and heat of being [...] The family process works toward sealing off the world. Small errors grow heads, fictions proliferate" (98). Jack, following Murray's suggestion, associates this proneness to error to the need for comfort and survival: "Facts threaten our happiness and security" he says (98). It was already demonstrated that through his refusal to see the world objectively and always explaining events through a superstitious lens, "Jack is attracted by the comfort of ignorance" (Helyer 132). Perhaps the filial shelter also thrives in fantasies and half-truths rather than embracing a reality that might break its fragile structure. What is

certain is that, whether by design or sheer ignorance, the family was unable to nurture sensible thinking in its members.

It is noteworthy to mention that Jack's family is far from being conventional. Composed of a third wife whose main appeal is her predictability (a trait that will prove to be a disguise later), and children who, apart from Wilder, all come from previous marriages, the roles that each member plays seem often confusing. It is the daughters for example who scold Babette for chewing too much gum and it is Heinrich who explains to his father the content of the toxic cloud. Instead of being guided by their parents, "Gladney's children are making his family a center of learning" (Boxall 44) or, since their opinions are generally misled, they are making it the center of "misinformation". The reason for this shift is that they were a generation born in the "waves and radiations" of television. Jack and Babette, too preoccupied with their fear of death, allowed the electronic device to take up their role in the same way that many of today's parents leave their children at the mercy of phones and tablets. Conroy explains: "The parent figures ("parent" seems not to indicate the role properly) are Jack and his wife Babette; but they do none of the passing on of wisdom that is supposed to be the older generation's portion. Instead, the television seems to be the chief source of information and even guidance" (Conroy: 154). The parents forfeited their function as educators and abandoned their children to be raised by the culture of images and broadcasting. By doing so, they deprived the family from its power to provide understanding and wisdom and conferred it entirely to television.

By denying children proper adult guidance, the parents also keep them in a constant state of mental childhood. Jack and Babette maintain the "youth" of their

children because it guarantees, through myth and misinformation, the comfort of a family sheltered from reality. Most importantly, it renders them blind to the passage of time and its inevitable conclusion. Babette, for example, forces herself to plunge into another form of superstition, believing that having dependent children makes her presence necessary and thus renders her immune to death. Jack reflects on this idea saying: “She also thinks nothing can happen to us as long as there are dependent children in the house. The kids are a guarantee of our relative longevity. We’re safe as long as they’re around” (DeLillo 117). There is no evidence that Jack shares this belief but he certainly participates in maintaining it. He nonetheless notices the slowed growth of his children. When walking around the supermarket with his youngest son Wilder, he makes an interesting remark: “It occurred to me that he was too old and too big to be sitting in supermarket carts. I also wondered why his vocabulary seemed to be stalled at twenty-five words” (47). Yet, Jack makes no efforts to amend the situation. Wilder is the first person Babette always runs to, and it is understood that she regards him as her ticket to longevity. Whether by convenience or fear, the postmodern family once again shuns its duty. Despite its flaws, family is still seen as a valued social construct “...but now its purpose is not to change children into adults (the traditional function of the family) but rather to ensure that adults remain children (the consumer paradigm)” (Conroy 165)

Don DeLillo’s bleak vision of postmodern American culture throws his characters into a world where everything is a simulacrum. Transcendental pursuits shatter into the mundane without the spiritual tradition that was forgotten and replaced by empty imitations. Television and technology, the two forces that reigned supreme

over the minds of people failed to fill the void and plunged society further into either confusion (with their unreliable and ever-changing information) or submission by creating zombie-like consumers who repeat slogans and product ads like Orwellian sheep. The family thrived in drifting away from truth and the university only recycled the concerns of youth and popular culture. The result of these changes is a clear collapse of values such as authenticity, wisdom and truth. The impossibility of meaning Jack constantly feels is ultimately linked to nihilism which generated a constant paranoia about death. Death here is not only depicted as the end of life but as a plunge into the ultimate meaninglessness, an acceptance of the nihil. Along with Babette, he engages in a series of strategies to counter their fear but their passivity, their overattachment to a bygone value-structure and their refusal to shape their own reality prevent them from achieving a Nietzschean overcoming of their meaningless circumstances. They instead fall into a desperate tendency to numb their existential dread through consumerism, escapism and hiding in crowds; behaviors that only amplify their angst and make them into passive individuals akin to Nietzsche's Last Man.

2.5. Contending with Nihilism: Killer, Diers, Plotters and Victims

2.5.1. The Gladneys as the Manifestation of Nietzsche's "Last Man"

As seen in the first chapter, Nietzsche's predictions about the death of religion and the overall meaninglessness that would engulf the Western world became a reality in the postmodern age. In the same way, he foresaw that the most common response would not be a courageous rebellion against circumstances and the forceful creation of personal values. After all, the *Übermensch*² is a rare breed that seldom manifests itself. The natural attitude of the masses remains more closely related to the "Letzter Mensch"³. The Gladneys, like the bulk of postmodern individuals, adopt a passive acceptance coupled with an escape towards conformity, hedonism and comfort, a herd-like reliance on groups and a propensity to be servile to any power that might alleviate the burden of existence.

It has been established that in *White Noise*, everything offers false promises and all forms of countering meaninglessness end up exacerbating it. The two major antidotes to nihilism that Jack and Babette run to are Hitler and Dylar respectively. Hitler, as seen earlier, inflates Jack's ego and grants him a touch of the immortal. Without the persona that links him to the powerful figure, Jack becomes an "indistinct" and "harmless" man prone to indulge in communal rites of consumerism to recharge the "life credit" he had lost. As for Babette, who concealed her anguish with a layer of feigned health and compassion, embraced a more radical solution. She

² The overman (sometimes translated as Superman): First introduced in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885), the *Übermensch* is Nietzsche's ideal of the self-accomplished, self-governed man who overcomes the weaknesses of mankind and establishes complete individuality and creates his own values.

³ The last man: The antithesis of the *Übermensch*.

placed her faith in the experimental tablets to free herself from the weight of consciousness at the cost of her health, her marriage and the left hemisphere of her brain. These two methods are not presented as solutions but as diversion to evade reality or as Arthur Salzman explains, they are used “to personalize respective hiding places”. He continues: “By affiliating himself with Hitler, Jack pretends to guarantee himself a measure of mythical proportion; by taking Dylar, an experimental drug that presumably eliminates one’s fear of death, Babette hopes to liberate her consciousness for life-affirming pursuits” (204).

These custom-made escapes brought the couple closer to their doom. In addition to the constant smallness he feels compared to his subject, Jack metamorphosed, albeit briefly, into a more radical copy of Hitler. The change was gradual, from academic specialization, to a well-crafted appearance, to the study of a language. Finally, by going to Germantown equipped with a loaded gun and a thirst for vengeance, he symbolically descended into the heart of his “Hitlerization”. He embraced the more murderous nature of his subject which is perhaps a more “authentic” representation of it. Yet, in accepting the “masculine violence”, he also consented to be subjected to it, resulting in a gun shot that brought him closer to death than ever before in the novel. In the case of Babette, her addiction to Dylar subjected her to a slower painless form of death. From the beginning of the novel, we can see signs of her memory loss. Later on, she reveals that the medicine caused a deterioration of her left brain. She traded a psychological fear of death with a physical manifestation of it. By avoiding reality, Jack and Babette are trapped in their own game. As LeClair clarifies, “The Gladneys are victims of self-inflicted double bind:

fearing death and desiring transcendence, they engage in evasive artifices and mastering devices that turn back upon them, bringing them closer to the death they feared..." (Le Clair 11).

Hitler and Dylar are unique coping mechanisms but the Gladneys display other, more common forms of weak escapism. Throughout the novel, Jack and Babette are attracted to the comfort of crowds, a tendency that explains their reliance on the family more than mere filial love. At work, Jack is either surrounded by crowds, generates crowds (in the instance of his joint lecture with Murray Siskind), or even discusses them when he projects images of Nazi propaganda. Babette teaches groups of elderly people in the church basement. When the toxic cloud reaches Blacksmith, the Gladneys follow the other families and cluster in the same places. Even when trying to escape the routine and spending a day in the country, Jack and Murray find themselves surrounded by crowds of tourists gathered around and taking pictures of the same object. There is no sense of individuality or even meaningful community, the act of congregating is displayed as a second nature. Stacey Olster notes: "Shorn of all sense of rational community, the characters in *White Noise* can only locate themselves collectively within the crowd and by way of those places that facilitate congregation" (Olster 82).

The aversion to solitude is a clear indication of the postmodern man's fear of facing his existential rootlessness. While humans are social creatures, the characters of *White Noise* are deeply detached from one another, having unique fears, beliefs and concerns that prevent them from connecting fully to others. Even the family is symbolically shattered by the fact that most of its members have different blood,

hidden schemes and misunderstood interests (like Heinrich's chess games with a death-row inmate). The need for crowds is then beyond social connection; it is a matter of survival. Survival here is not understood in the primitive sense, since Jack's status and profession allow him to live independently of others. It is the avoidance of meeting the nothingness of being, a cover that prevents lost souls from staring into the abyss. In other words, much like television and tabloids, it is a distraction from death, although Jack sees it as an antidote to it. He explains this idea by stating that "to become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone." (DeLillo 89). To die as an individual is to live as one, but the Nietzschean "last man" lacks the courage to nurture such identity. Hiding in crowds for fear of physical death ultimately causes the devaluation of individuality, or as Maria Nadotti puts it, "There is something menacing and violent about a mass of people which makes us think of the end of individuality, whether they are gathered around a military leader or around a holy man" (Interview with essayist Maria Nadotti qtd. in Saltzman 197).

The dangers of the crowd exceed robbing its members from their individuality. While a person can be sensible, the noise and heat that groups generate plunge them into error. They engage in irrational rituals of naïve life-affirmation such as servitude to mass-media, reckless shopping, chanting the glories of an idealistic system or pledging allegiance to self-proclaimed saviors that promise nothing but myth and death. It is no wonder that in 1997, 39 perfectly able individuals took their lives in the

hope of being picked up by extraterrestrials⁴. This event demonstrates the visionary nature of Don DeLillo's work that described crowds as avid consumers of stories of UFO's⁵ and other supernatural happening that replaced the need for spirituality. We have seen that the family, when grouped, thrives in myth and misinformation but it is not caused by its overfamiliarity as Jack thought. It is rather caused by its very nature of being a crowd. Cantor explains: "One can have community, but only if it rooted in error; if one wants truth and rationality, one will have to pay for it in the form of wide spread anomie and rootlessness" (Cantor 61). The "last man" who abhors isolation because of its potential of revealing his existential meaninglessness, chooses comfort at the expense of truth.

Every herd needs a shepherd and the characters of *White Noise* are no exception. Devoid of the strength necessary to swim against the current, they search for leaders, no matter how illusory, to give them a sense of direction. These characters are willing to be "servile" as Jack described his attitude towards the SIMUVAC agent. The "leaders", be them technocratic, political, or mediatic fail to provide solid answers in the same way that the man with the data only offered Jack a few drops of ambiguous information that kept him on a leash. Despite unsatisfactory solutions, "The characters in *White Noise* are quite willing to place themselves under the control of others" (Olster 86) because they cannot exert any control over their own lives. This is a trait quite distinctive of the Nietzschean "last man" exhibited by the majority of the characters in the novel (except perhaps Heinrich and Murray). When displayed by

⁴ Referring to the Heaven's Gate cult members who, following the death of their leader Marshall Applewhite, committed mass suicide, believing that they would be picked up by a UFO and transformed into perfect being.

⁵ Unidentified Flying Objects.

others, Jack can sometimes perceive the futility and naivety of such behavior. Commenting on the group of elderly who follow Babette's classes, he says: "I am always surprised at their acceptance and trust, the sweetness of their belief. Nothing is too doubtful to be of use to them as they seek to redeem their bodies from a lifetime of bad posture. It is the end of skepticism" (DeLillo 38). Two things are suggested by this statement, first that their hopes are fruitless since a life of bad posture cannot be mended by a few lessons at the end of life, and second, that in the presence of their guide, they were willing to believe anything that was fed to them. We know that Babette spoke of Sufi and Hindu philosophy, Yoga and other foreign concept. Yet, her audience took everything for truth and followed her commands without questions. Jack, so prone to find fault in others, does not realize that he reproduces the same naïve compliance, either with officials or with his friend Murray whose wildest ideas are taken by Jack as irrevocable facts.

Babette explained that the need to look up to somebody in power results from the volatile and ever-changing nature of the postmodern world. Without a clear concept of truth, individuals are prone to lose their distinction between right and wrong. Without a fixed system that sets them onto a clear path, they err without knowing which direction to take. Clearly, these individuals lack the will to establish their own values or live according to their own rules. Their only solution is to seek someone who would set them into the right track or at least validate or disapprove of their action; a true Kantian self-inflicted infantilism. Babette explains:

Knowledge changes every day. People like to have their beliefs reinforced. Don't lie down after eating a heavy meal. Don't drink

liquor on an empty stomach. If you must swim, wait at least an hour after eating. The world is more complicated for adults than it is for children. We didn't grow up with all these shifting facts and attitudes. One day they just started appearing. So people need to be reassured by someone in a position of authority that a certain way to do something is the right way or the wrong way, at least for the time being. (DeLillo 187)

The shepherds that the characters of *White Noise* follow take different forms. Celebrities as the heightened expression of religious void fill the lives of the professors of American Environment with a sense of importance produced by the privilege of living in the same country and era as their idols as well as the possibility of being blessed by their presence. This fascination exceeds the students of these figures and engulfs the larger public who sees stardom as the closest thing to perfection, albeit simulated perfection. Mark Conroy views it as a new religion, which is an idea not far from the truth seeing how devoted fans can be in elevating, imitating and worshiping (sometimes literally) their favorite performers. He explains: "the religious in this new world is thus preserved, but applied to human celebrity rather than to angels and gods" (Conroy 154). The world of simulacra gave those individuals a certain light of guidance that the meaning-starved masses flock to.

Jack's fascination with Hitler produces the same feelings experienced by crazed fans of pop culture icons. It also creates strong emotions of awe and admiration that gave a sense to his dull life. Cantor notes: "The mass appeal of the dictator and the rock star are alike. Both touch similar chords in their audiences, both

are in fact performers in the age of mass media, both fill the void in the everyday lives of common people; both appeal to primitive emotions, both fascinate crowds by the image, and reality, of violence” (Cantor 63). Filling the void remains the main motive for the herd-like mentality of the masses, and seeing how dictators produce the same effect as celebrities, there is no wonder why many people today either fall victim to the world of enhanced images, or embrace extremist political identities on both sides of the spectrum (Marxist communism, far-right nationalism, religious fanaticism...). Even when not blinded by the allure of living “shepherds”, some prefer to look behind in their search for meaning. Leaders of a fallen empire or fathers with heroic patriotism sometimes dictate their morality and vision of life to those individuals who fail to find meaning in their present. This can be seen in Jack Gladney’s visit to the old burial ground where he walked between the names “suggesting a moral rigor” (114) and listened to their appeasing silence. Jack was aware of the effect that the past had on him saying that “the dead have a presence” (114). What he meant is not only that he felt the presence of the people buried there, but that he understood that his alienated vision of reality stems from his consciousness being suspended in their time rather than his present or as Conroy puts it, “Gladney’s homage is not to his personal forebears, but to the idea of the past as a source of authority for the present” (Conroy 154).

Another sign of the “last man” is drowning one’s insecurities in hedonism. In postmodern times, where everything is commodified, the ultimate expression of this tendency is done through consumerism. Shopping and accumulating possessions becomes an act of self-gratification. When done in masses, in the supermarket, it turns

into a ritual; a communal semi-religious act that numbs the pain of existential emptiness and fills its subjects with a temporary feeling of self-worth. Eduardo Mendieta notes: “As consumers we all participate in the sacrament of consumption: buying is good, consuming is salvation” (Mendieta 398). The best example of the seemingly redemptive nature of consumerism in the novel is Jack’s encounter with his colleague who notes that without his academic persona, Jack looked harmless and indistinct. Upon losing the last shred of self-esteem he had, Jack’s immediate response was to regain “life credit” by drowning in consumerism. Shopping would procure him the meaning and value he could not produce on his own:

I shopped with reckless abandon. I shopped for immediate needs and distant contingencies. I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it. I sent clerks into their fabric books and pattern books to search for elusive designs. I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I’d forgotten existed. Brightness settled around me. (DeLillo 100)

Jack’s “growth” would prove to be temporary and ultimately unsatisfactory because of its superficiality. Although he does not realize it on the spot, his shopping spree does not differ much from his black gown and dark glasses. They are all empty coping mechanisms, “Jack replaces his inauthentic Hitler aura with the equally inauthentic aura of shopping, which he experiences, however, as authentic” (Duvall 178). In the world of simulacra, it is impossible for the postmodern man to crystallize an authentic self and the allure of consumerism remains strong because it creates a

sensation of individuality and control. Yet, if we are what we own and we are constantly updating our inventory, our identity becomes as volatile as the possessions we accumulate and as disposable as those we discard. In other words, consumerism is nothing but a transient hedonistic impulse that fails to produce lasting meaning.

Jack realizes the crushing weight of possessions later in the novel. Hoarding creates its opposite effect and everything he owned quickly fades into uselessness. Like Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death*, when hiding away from our fears, we end up locking them in with us. In the same way, "Shopping suffocates us in fortifications it supposedly affects; the hollow men are the stuffed men" (Salzman 201). Jack's major reason for consumerism is smothering his fear of death, or at least life's emptiness that reminds him of it. Ironically, the mass of worthless objects kept around the house only magnified this fear. He eventually begins throwing away things in bulk, commodities and paperwork alike. He says: "The more things I threw away, the more I found. The house was a sepia maze of old and tired things. There was an immensity of things, an overburdening weight, a connection, a mortality" (280). Jack cleverly notices the "mortality" that these objects suggest. Their ephemeral nature reflected his own, reminding him of his quick fading towards nothingness. The same act of shopping that filled him with life earlier ended up depleting it. LeClair notes: "The ironic result of possessions occurs later: Jack's fear of dying is intensified, rather than relieved, by the objects he has collected over the years. When his things seem like weight he must shed" (Le Clair 13). Jack illustrates the paradox of consumerism as a hedonistic escape. The vicious cycle of instant gratification starts with a craving that ends in a crushing guilt. In turn the guilt forms a void that creates more craving to

be filled. The whole process resembles St. Exupéry's alcoholic who drinks to drown the shame of being a drunkard in *The Little Prince*. The loop is endless and ultimately fruitless.

Jack and Babette's attempts to find meaning, despite their failure, show an active longing for lost values and a dissatisfaction with the meaninglessness of their times. Other characters however, embrace the nihilism that surrounds them. They view the simulacra as real and reality as a relic of a by-gone era. Murray Siskind can be considered the personification of this regressive morality, urging himself and others to let go of all hopes of redemption and engage without restraints in the frivolity of the present. Through his eloquence and covert cunning, he pushes Jack progressively into self-destruction, both through the dismantlement of the self and eventually through violence.

2.5.2. Murray Siskind as the Voice of Regressive Nihilism

Murray Jay Siskind is an ex-sportswriter turned lecturer and a new addition to the college-on-the-hill. A Jewish émigré used to (and tired of) the "heat" of big cities, he displays, from the first pages of his description, a child-like fascination with the world around him. Unlike Jack, Murray embraces the elements that compose the simulacra and tries to convert others into his devotion. Television, movies, tabloids, supermarkets, everything is hidden signals and subliminal messages to be taken in with full lungs. He advises his students to consume TV ads instead of shunning them, and his lectures are manifestations of the control that popular culture has over the

postmodern university. At times, his insistence on seeing fabricated meaning in every detail of the mundane American cultural landscape appears fake and self-imposed rather than objective. Yet, Jack, as the observant eye of the novel (and arguably of his generation of hybrid modernist/post-modernists) soaks in Murray's ideas and believes them as truth. Murray's power in the novel does not originate from an exceptional wit but rather from Jack's ready compliance that granted his colleague a position of authority over him.

Murray's physical description too suggests an element of disguise akin to Jack's J.A.K persona. He had round glasses and a pointy beard that "seemed an optional component, to be stuck on or removed as circumstances warranted" (21). With his thick eyebrows and hunched posture, he betrayed a malicious nature hidden under a certain defenselessness. His weakness, again unlike Jack, is fully accepted. With women for instance (his main target in the novel is Babette), he chooses the path of "vulnerability", "self-depreciation" and "self-mockery" (31) to solicit a pity-based admiration in the opposite sex; a method that hardly produced any results except on the paid workers who accepted his perverted (also self-demeaning) requests.

Murray Siskind's description alone presents him as the voice of regressive nihilism, a man who took the worst his reality offered and aligned them with his identity, from the devaluation of the human soul, to the acceptance of images instead of reality, to the belief in irrational theories that subvert spirituality. His thoughts and ideas, presented mostly as answers to Jack's uncertainties further cement this theory. And by the end of the novel, through a plotted distortion of Nietzschean overcoming, Murray sends his friend into a wild chase that nearly cost him his life.

The first idea presented by Murray is that beauty lies in primitivity and happiness is found by letting go of the conscious. In other words, he advocated a return to what appears to be the simplicity of regression, an infantile exemption from the crushing responsibilities of modern life. In explaining the universe for instance, Murray is perfectly willing to accept (or urges others to accept) any fantasy, be it supernatural or rooted in an ancient shamanic tradition. The importance is the external aura, the feeling it generates (or rather simulates). That is why, as seen earlier, he advises Jack to study reincarnation or resurrection to soothe his concerns about death. Even a commercial product is sufficient to produce such effect. He sees "...the coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants, like mantras. '*Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it.*' The medium practically overflows with sacred formulas if *we can remember* how to respond innocently and get past our irritation, weariness and disgust" (DeLillo 65-66). It is precisely that "innocence" that he advocates. Seeking meaning is senseless, accepting triviality and myth is the only way. The redeeming rites of excessive shopping or congregating are useless as well, since he lives in a small dark apartment with very little possessions in which he spends days alone in front of the TV set. The problems of life and the heaviness of death are caused by progress, and his solution is a return to the naivety of children. LeClair explains: "A peripatetic Socrates, Siskind turns into Mephistopheles, a sneaky-looking, beard-wearing mage who infiltrates Gladney's consciousness, not by promising an advance in knowledge, as Faust's tempter did, but by claiming "we know too much". He suggests regression" (Le Clair 19). The "infiltration" to Jack's mind was successful and at many instances, he too, wishes for a spiritual regression. When confronted with

the news of his toxin exposure, Jack realizes that his rationality and objectivity only accentuate the coldness and desperation of his situation. A less sophisticated mind, rooted in superstition on the other hand would see sense in the matter. He says: “The genius of the primitive mind is that it can render human helplessness in noble and beautiful ways” (156).

It is important to restate that Jack sees Murray as a “guru” and adopts his ideas as quickly as they are uttered, “Murray’s interpretations become Jack’s convictions; Murray’s speculations, Jack’s experiences” (Duvall 183). Jack often translates Murray’s stances into actions but they rarely do him any good (except perhaps taking up German lessons) because Murray does not have his friend’s best interest in mind. Duvall goes as far to suggest that “Siskind is the true villain of *White Noise*. Seductive and smart, he nevertheless encourages and fosters the worse in Jack” (Duvall 180). What is certain is that Murray is far from being a hero. He dissuades his students from outgrowing the allure of TV, he uses Jack’s fame to promote his own lectures on Elvis Presley, he frequents prostitutes and covets his friend’s wife, and he celebrates the death of his colleague Dimitrios Cotsakis with the self-centered expression “better him than me” (184). This “villainy”, combined with his praise of primitivity, is epitomized by Murray’s “final solution”⁶ to Jack’s fear of death.

Contrary to everything Jack had been doing, Murray’s answer was not only to accept being part of the plot but to engage in the action of plotting himself. Murray says: “Your whole life is a plot, a scheme, a diagram. It is a failed scheme but that’s

⁶ The “Final Solution” here is a reference of the meeting point between Jack and Hitler. Historically, it is the eradication of Jews by the Nazis. In the novel, it is the killing of Willy Mink. Jack fully accepts the murderous nature of his subject. This concept is nearing the absurd since the person who suggested this fusion is himself Jewish.

not the point. To plot is to affirm life, to seek shape and control" (311). This suggestion has the form of a Nietzschean shaping of one's destiny but its essence leads to self-destruction. Jack had been haunted by the hazy images of Willy Mink, the man who supplied his wife with Dylar in exchange for sexual favors. At this point, Jack was delving in primitive violence (mostly by carrying the pistol his father-in-law gave him), and slowly accepting his "male homicidal rage" as Babette refers to it. Murray's cure is the acceptance of violence; to live is to kill. He encourages Jack's rage and promises that killing others guarantees one's own survival. He explains that the world is made of "killers and diers" (310) and that it is impossible to escape the equation. One has only to choose his role. He continues: "But think what it's like to be a killer. Think how exciting it is, in theory, to kill a person in direct confrontation. If he dies, you cannot. To kill him is to gain life-credit. The more people you kill, the more credit you store up" (310). As expected, Murray covered his radicality by suggesting that it was nothing but an Academic tendency to theorize all possibilities. Yet, he was aware of the effect he had on his friend. We have seen that Murray does not partake directly in his theories and prefers to instill them in others. He uses the protection that his apparent "harmlessness" confers to shape the world around him according to his desires. In this case, he felt that Jack was eclipsing him. At work, Jack is the respected founder of a unique department, and as a family man, he is married to Babette with her "important hair" and appeasing presence. Both positions were envied by Murray. The secret motive, one might argue, was to eliminate Jack (symbolically too, the voice of postmodernism attempted to erase the incompatible modernist/romantic). John Duval explains: "If he can get Jack to commit murder, Jack

if caught, would eliminate himself from both the college and from Babette's bed. Murray is a killer, even if his pleasure is psychological rather than visceral" (Duvall 184).

While the majority of characters in *White Noise* sought ways to replenish their meaningless existence with crowd identification, sublime escapism and self-indulgent consumerism, Murray abandoned his will to the demands of his time. He glorified the devaluing elements of postmodernism and conferred to them the very meaning they demolished. Yet, Murray kept himself distant, taking pleasure only in the psychological conformity to the system in place. He understood that an adherence to his beliefs leads to self-destruction. Willy Mink, on the other hand, the would-be "dier" in Siskind's equation, lacked Jack's modernist resistance and Murray's guarded compliance. Instead, he was an agent turned victim, a prey to the forces he initially served. Mink is ultimately the image of a man consumed (in both senses of absorbed and diseased) by the nihilism of a postmodern culture etched in simulacra.

2.5.3. Dreams of Heroic Overcoming and the Encounter with the Fragmented Postmodern Identity

Mink is an enigmatic figure in *White Noise*. He initially appears as a "grey" man resembling the statics of a TV set, existing only in Jack's mind. Later in the novel, he is found in a room surrounded by those "waves and radiations" in a moment that resembles a dream sequence. His robotic speech and complete abandon to the forces that plague him (medication, media, isolation and death) make him the

embodiment of Jack's fear and perhaps, to some degree, of the direction society is taking if it does not find a way to retrieve its spiritual and moral bearings. Mink is first mentioned when Babette's Dylar secret is discovered. After denying taking anything for a while, leading Jack to conduct his own investigation, she finally admits both her motives and her methods for getting the mysterious pills. She reveals her well-concealed fear of death and she confesses how, after the program of testing Dylar on human guinea-pigs was shut down, she kept meeting Mink in a dilapidated hotel room where she offered her body in exchange for the tablets. From that moment, Mink is referred to as Mr. Grey, a "composite man" instead of an individual. This is done to conceal his identity and appease her husband's "male homicidal rage", but her description is closer to reality than she thought.

When Jack meets Mink, the first thing he notices is his physical appearance. Though he sees his features to be somewhat Asian, Jack is unable to discern Mink's origin. The word "composite" used earlier because of his affiliation to a group of scientists, now takes on a different meaning. Sitting with his Bermuda short in front of the TV, Mink appeared to be an amalgam of different races. According to Leonard Wilcox, this is an indication of a lost American identity caused by the culture's insistence on internationalization. He writes: "Mink is the personification of a new order; a composite man of undecidable ethnicity, he suggests a world where national and ethnic differences have been eradicated in an increasing internationalization of American popular culture" (Wilcox 106). This indistinctness goes beyond race and borders. Instead of symbolizing the end of ethnic identity, Mink's fragmented self suggests an end of personal identity. He is a man of multiple origins, learning English

from American and British TV, renting a room in the depths of Germantown where he engaged in a secret affair with a faceless American woman in a ski mask (referring to Babette). He laid his broken speech while swallowing a large quantity of Dylar in front of the fast-changing images of the screen. Mink's composite nature does not stop at his origin, it is the indication of a fragmented identity made up of incompatible pieces assembled from different sources in a multicultural, multi-optional vision of truth.

Mink is also affected by one of Dylar's side effects. Words are received by his brain as reality: the simulacrum replaces the real. The words "hail of bullets" for example, trigger real bodily responses, his fight-or-flight instinct takes control and he flings himself on the floor and crawls away for shelter. The very notion of reality is supplanted by descriptions of it; the epitome of the world of images described throughout this chapter. It also depicts Mink as a vision of a postmodern man who abandons himself to the dehumanizing elements that the novel warns against. Olster notes that "Mink's schizophrenia confirms the complete disintegration of the humanist sense of self" (Olster 90). Through medication (the dark side of science), TV representation, multiplicity of truth, and the "internationalization of American popular culture", he ceases to be an individual and transforms into a machine-like, ever-consuming, TV-mimicking, projection of postmodern nihilism.

This will be more apparent later but Jack and Mink are more alike than either of them realizes, "What Jack does not see is how much Mink is his own doppelgänger" (Olster 90). The schizophrenic "grey" figure is the successful purposeful man who failed to reclaim his individuality, a concept that Jack was

willing to forcefully regain through a daring act of heroism. “The plot that Jack hatches in order to kill Willy Mink embodies his dream of existential self-determination, precisely what his culture denies him” (Lentricchia 64). Jack, unlike his former attempts to avoid advancing through life according to a plan, followed Murray’s suggestion and adopted “plotting” as a way of reclaiming his life. The scenario that he kept playing in his mind was to shoot Mink multiple times in the stomach “for maximum pain” (324), then place the weapon in his victim’s hand and write a suicide note. Again, the plan feels reminiscent of an action movie that colored Jack’s subconscious. Gladney quickly starts to delight in the suffering of his adversary. After the first shot, he sees his strength reflected by Mink’s helplessness and terror. He says: “I tried to see myself from Mink’s viewpoint. Looming, dominant, gaining life-power, storing up life-credit” (332-333). Yet, Jack’s fantasies were just that: fantasies. Upon placing the weapon in Mink’s hand, he carelessly left a bullet in the chamber and a victim that still breathes. The result was a retaliation, a painful return to reality through a bullet to the forearm. Pain is real, far from the aestheticized images of violence, and it was enough to deflate his newly-gained power. His implication with “plot” made him also a victim of it, “...he who would be master of plot, at the end, becomes again, plot’s creature, as he plays, again, the role of the clown of plot” (Lentricchia 64). Jack’s dream of attaining a higher position suddenly implodes, “The world collapsed inward, all those vivid textures and connections buried in mounds of ordinary stuff. I was disappointed. Hurt, stunned and disappointed. What had happened to the higher plane of energy in which I’d carried out my scheme?” (DeLillo 333). The disappointment does not only lie in his inability

to conclude his scheme. It is also a realization that the violent descent into his murderous primitivity was not entirely authentic; and that it was perhaps another form of conformity, a suggestion by others and an imitation of fictional plots. Ruth Helyer explains: “Jack feels let down. He has carried out society’s expectation by avenging his wife’s infidelity, so why is he left feeling nothing but pain, fear, and confusion? Obeying social pressures to conform to stereotypical identities is never satisfactory; no performance can ever be good enough as the image of what is normal and what is perfect changes and evolves” (Helyer 134).

It is when both characters are wounded and confused that they appear as a mirror-image of each other, “both are now figures of the powerless male” (Wilcox 110). The plan of courageous overcoming collapses, leaving Jack with the futility of his attempt. “The encounter with Mink suggests the untenability of heroic self-fashioning, as Gladney’s epiphany collapses into postmodern schizophrenia” (Wilcox 107). The rush to the hospital and the anticlimactic conclusion slowly returns the reader to the dull nature of Jack’s life. The nun who treats him reveals her lack of faith, annihilating his attempt to confer a religious sense to his suffering. Jack’s search for a higher meaning (though still alive by the end of the novel) was ultimately fruitless even with his courageous dive into the abyss of the Jungian “shadow”⁷. The novel concludes, in its final chapter, with an ordinary yet surreal scene from the lives of a small-town American family, a scene that can be translated either as an indication of the randomness of life or as a sign that somewhere, beyond grandiose schemes, there exists a glimpse of a truer and simpler meaning.

⁷ In psychology, it refers to the subconscious traits that the individual is too afraid to explore because they seemingly contradict his ego (the ideal image of the self).

2.6. Conclusion

The final escapade of Wilder who rode his tricycle through traffic and the abnormal color of the sunset and the brightness of the sky that remain after the airborne toxic event suggest a certain meaning floating in the air. Though we return to the mundanity of doctor visits and supermarket shopping, one can detect a possibility of a deeper appreciation for simplicity. DeLillo does not force an interpretation upon the reader. Despite his pessimistic description of postmodern American culture, the text does not appear to be nihilistic in nature in the sense that it does not push a certain ideology or force the protagonist to adopt a defeatist or destructive stance. Jack is not dissuaded from his attempts. He and the reader, are merely confronted with reality. What DeLillo seems to imply is that meaning and truth may exist beyond the shifting elements of society.

Don DeLillo does not advocate nihilism but warns against its establishment in a culture in decline. The loss of meaning is neither natural nor necessary but is the result of a society that took a wrong turn. Spirituality was abandoned with the death of religion. Reality was replaced by the mediated images of television. Truth was rendered relative by the incessant flow of shifting information. The bastions of knowledge succumbed to the alluring powers of popular culture and the individual forfeited his self-determination to blend in with the masses through the herd-like rituals of shopping, congregating and constantly seeking guidance and direction from others. These elements plunged American society into a nihilistic rat-race where hedonism, escapism and the accumulation of possessions seem to be the only ways to counter the dread of existential nothingness. Yet, the possibility of meaning remains

present, though concealed behind the unauthenticity of the postmodern man's fabricated identity.

CHAPTER THREE:

Existential Nihilism and Destructive (and Self-Destructive)

Rebellion in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*

CHAPTER THREE

Existential Nihilism and Destructive (and Self-Destructive) Rebellion in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*

3.1. Introduction

The characters of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* retained a passive attitude towards the meaninglessness of their time and latched on the remnants of modernism to infuse their reality with a sense of spirituality or transcendence in the hope of countering the ghost of nihilism that haunted them. Chuck Palahniuk, on the other hand, chose a different approach to exteriorize the existential discontent of his generation. In his 1996 novel, *Fight Club*, the possibility of meaning was long lost and the spirit of the simulacra had already invaded every aspect of American society creating a horde of zombie-like conformists addicted to consumerism and unable to confront the emptiness of their lives. His unnamed protagonist embraced rather than rejected nihilism and took a more active, seemingly Nietzschean (although pathological) stance towards the monotony and "smallness" of his existence. With the creation of a bold and guilt-free alter ego, he declared the world beyond repair and the soul beyond saving and took up destruction and self-destruction as the only solutions. Through increasingly violent acts, first self-inflicted then directed towards the fabric of capitalism that he conceived as the source of his despair, he ended up believing in the idea of "tabula rasa" as the condition for building a functioning society. In other

words, the active destruction of society was adopted as an antidote to the existential nihilism that pervaded him.

The condition of the helpless pawn at the hands of corporate dictatorship that the novel discussed, the unattainable standards of a consumerist society and the repressed desire to transgress and break free from the shackles of “decency” resonated with the readers of *Fight Club*. Moreover, David Fincher’s 1999 film adaptation of the novel starring Bradd Pitt and Edward Norton transformed the work into a cult classic. Both readers and viewers (especially men) identified with the helplessness of the narrator and looked up to his double Tyler Durden who represented their desired self. However, what fans of *Fight Club* failed to recognize is that the novel did not advocate active nihilism as a solution. What must be understood is that despite their popularity, “[Palahniuk’s] novels themselves, however, are not mouthpieces for their damaged narrators; they are critical of them” (Kavadlo 12). What Palahniuk presents is a critique of both the existential void of his society and the counterfeit heroism of nihilistic destruction. He also proposes, though covertly, a third option that transcends the juvenile rage against Being that the novel seems to promote.

The existential confusion of the characters of *Fight Club* starts with a disturbed temporality of the plot. The novel begins at the end, with the protagonist/narrator standing on a roof top with a pistol in his mouth while a group of terrorists calling themselves Project Mayhem are busy at work planning the demolition of the building. The character holding the gun is named Tyler, supposedly a former friend. He promises the protagonist a heroic death, claiming that the destruction they were about to witness would make history by starting an active quest

to erode society. In the middle of chaos, the narrator states that it was all because of a woman named Marla Singer. After positing most of the themes and creating enough suspense to engage the curiosity of the reader, the novel goes back to the beginning, depicting the life of an unnamed narrator stuck in the meaningless loop of yuppie culture.

The protagonist is a lonely, friendless middle-class man in his late twenties, detached from his family and having only his job and his accumulation of commodities to occupy himself. He works at a car recall company in which he must calculate the risk/cost factors to remove vehicles from the market. His company's policy is based on profit, neglecting health hazards and causing many deaths, a fact that plunges the protagonist deeper into a hatred of his reality and a detachment from others through his dehumanizing profession. He suffers from chronic insomnia, among other ailments, which is essentially, as his doctor explains, a symptom of "something larger". His only cure is attending support groups for illnesses such as testicular cancer, brain parasites and tuberculosis. By witnessing real pain and death, feeling accepted (although only through fakery since he suffered from none of those diseases), and crying freely, the protagonist could find a release mechanism that temporarily cured his insomnia. All of this changed when another "faker", Marla Singer, started attending the same support groups. Her lies reflected his own and, although he was attracted to her, he mainly saw her as a threat. She woke him up to his inauthenticity, retriggering his insomnia and forcing him to create another coping mechanism in the form of a dissociative identity disorder.

It was at this time that we are introduced to Tyler Durden, a strong, charming unapologetic emblem of masculinity with a personality that represents everything the protagonist lacked and wished to have. He is immediately taken as a guru, a friend and even a father figure. Tyler exposes the flaws of capitalist society and urges the narrator to reject his limiting lifestyle. He asks him to punch him as hard as he could resulting in a fight enjoyed by both parties. The brawl's liberating effect gives birth to an organized underground fighting ring dubbed Fight Club. The club gathered men from all walks of life, allowing them to exteriorize their frustrations through violence under strict rules starting with a vow of secrecy. The idea's popularity was immediate, causing many other fighting rings to form around the country.

Destruction begins engulfing the narrator's life starting with the explosion of his condominium. He then moves to a decrepit house with Tyler where they manufacture soap out of human fat discarded after liposuctions. Tyler also had a few part-time jobs in which he lived his philosophy of rebellion through acts of public disturbance. The two characters quickly build a tolerance to petty vandalism and decide to move from self-destruction to a total war against capitalism. They create Project Mayhem with the purpose of destroying society and plunging humanity into a cultural "ice age". The members, called Space Monkeys, resembled a colony of black-clothed ants living under the same roof, following Tyler's orders and conducting increasingly violent acts of rebellion that culminated in the death of Bob, a former member of a support group the narrator attended. Bob's death brought the narrator back to reality and forced him to turn against Tyler who had been missing for a time. In his search, the narrator realizes that he and Tyler Durden were two sides of the

same coin, two seemingly opposing identities sharing the same body. The only way to stop Tyler was to kill himself. Here, we are taken back to the opening scene of the novel with the protagonist standing on a rooftop with a gun in his mouth. Marla and a few members of a support group follow him there and attempt to dissuade him from shooting himself. He ends up pulling the trigger but instead of dying, he finds himself disfigured and placed in a mental health asylum.

As seen in the summary, the novel treats many themes of violence, self-mutilation and transgression. Many scenes are depicted graphically, making the novel not suitable for the faint of heart. Jesse Kavadlo describes such “roughness” of narration saying “Imagine what it’s like to have your eyes rubbed raw with broken glass. This is what reading Chuck Palahniuk is like” (03). This aspect, however, is done mostly for shock value designed to solicit a reaction from the reader. The work must be understood beyond the mere depictions of violence and taken as an existential piece of fiction aimed at exposing the meaninglessness of postmodern capitalist culture, as well as a parody of the pointless self-righteousness of nihilistic heroism.

It is important to mention that many of the issues raised by Chuck Palahniuk were already discussed by Don DeLillo but the attitude of the characters of *Fight Club* is radically different, highlighting another aspect of nihilism that actively attempts to devalue the social order. Another difference between the two writers is the style. Palahniuk introduces a certain aural quality in his works that makes it lighter, bordering the parody while DeLillo maintains gravity throughout his works. Indeed, “While DeLillo’s narratives are austere, gray and almost metallic, Palahniuk’s are charming, almost nostalgic, empathetic and softened by the lull of his rhythmic writing. If

DeLillo's writing is muscular in its diction, Palahniuk's is comforting in its aphoristic one-liners and the aural quality of his writing" (Mendieta 407). The "softness" of Palahniuk's style, contrasted with the grimness of his topics makes for an interesting blend where enjoyment does not prevent serious philosophical interpretation. It is that interpretation that this chapter attempts to focus on.

3.2. A Life Worth Dying: The Social and Cultural Roots of Nihilism

The characters of *Fight Club* are not born-nihilists. Their rage against being stems from a deep alienation from a culture that provides none of the comforting values necessary for a well-functioning individual. Concepts such as spirituality, family and occupational purpose are replaced by cynicism, seclusion and capitalist servitude. Their need for destruction is then nothing more than rebellious attempts to break free from the mental numbness that their reality caused. For that reason, "Palahniuk's fiction thus must be read as the transgressive response to the antipathy which plagues generations brought up in a nihilistic and increasingly meaningless culture of never-ending violence, media and technological intrusions, and consumerism" (M'Rabty 106). A closer look into the topography of capitalist American culture as depicted in the novel can prove useful to interpret the character's need for dismantling the social order around them.

3.2.1. A Dehumanizing Culture

Existence for the characters of *Fight Club* is a dizzying experience resembling the half-awake state of the insomniac protagonist. It is so detached and mechanical that only a car crash created a brief awakening referred to as a “near-life experience” (Palahniuk 148). In many ways, the protagonist, using Tyler’s voice, blames his woes on society and it is undoubtable that the cultural imperatives of a middle-class consumerist yuppie leave no room for meaning or human connection. Steven Gold goes as far as to assert that modern American culture has an inherent proclivity for the creation of dissociative disorders because “various aspects of modern life are pointedly depicted as fostering a world in which life is disjointed, spatially and temporally disorienting, socially alienating and isolating, and emotionally and experientially detached” (15). While this description might seem hyperbolic, aspects of it can easily be understood through the lens of the novel’s narrator.

The first thing that can be noticed is the protagonist’s complete seclusion. His relationships were either based on work, a slave-master power dynamic with no potential of authenticity, or on victimization and lies in the hope of finding comfort in support groups. Family, a strong force that maintains sanity and offers a firm grip on reality is absent in *Fight Club*. The protagonist had been abandoned by his father triggering a strong Oedipus complex that will be discussed later, and a general resentment towards the whole family institution. James Giles explains that, for the protagonist, family could never be a source of solace. He states: “Since he is unmarried, childless, and alienated from his parents, family can never be a meaningful anchor for him” (34). Marriage was discarded as a possible solution to his solitude

because he perceived it as an inevitable failure and because he never outgrew his state of neglected child. He says: “I’m a thirty-year-old boy, and I’m wondering if another woman is really the answer I need” (Palahniuk 51). At this point, one might wonder how this attitude towards family can be blamed on society. The narrator’s father accumulated wives as if he were starting “franchises”, leaving him with only a feminine figure to raise him. His mother is rarely mentioned in the novel, betraying more resentment towards her and explaining the glimpses of misogyny that can be detected throughout the work. This dysfunctional family structure is treated as an epidemic experienced by many men of that era. The members of the Fight Club, for instances, are described as “a generation of men raised by women” (50). Although this exact model of disfunction reveals mostly the protagonist’s masculinity crisis, it also shows the devaluation of family norms. This pattern was seen in DeLillo’s *White Noise* with the incapable parents and the children raised by television, and exaggerated here with completely absent parents and a resentful “Puer Aeternus”¹. What cannot be contested is that the failure of the family to assert itself lived on with the narrator who veered towards seclusion and imitated his father’s neglect in his own relationship with Marla Singer.

In the absence of family, God can remain an unshakable force that governs people’s lives but religious belief, as a guiding value, is missing in *Fight Club* despite the many references to Christian tradition. There is no semblant of religiosity or spirituality on the part of the main characters. They nonetheless use the unescapable

¹ Commonly referred to as the Peter Pan Syndrome. In Jungian Psychology, it is a state of lingering child-like potential with a constant desire to break free from restrictions. In popular culture, it is simply social immaturity and the inability to crystalize an adult identity. Both concepts can be attributed to the novel’s Protagonist.

references to the figure of Christ or salvation to comprehend their reality. These references are distorted and often reversed revealing a desire to reject their traditional connotations. For example, when the mechanic who personified Tyler's creed started driving through incoming traffic to scare the narrator into embracing fearlessness and quitting his job, he says: "Believe in me and you shall die, forever" (145), a clear reversal of the "eternal life" sought by religious believers. The mechanic also reveals a potential reason for this lack of spirituality. He explains that "If you're male and you're Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do you believe about God?" (141). The narrator's generation being raised without fathers is by extension cut off from God, a fact that explains why "God is absent in the novel, and his characters, in the face of a preoccupation with death, must struggle to find some sustaining spiritual meaning on their own" (Giles 27). The protagonist's path to nihilism was paved by repeated disappointments in his search for a guiding figure. Both father and God were absent from his life leading him to project their power into Tyler Durden who, for the bulk of the novel, served as an undisputed authority. This idea becomes apparent when he discovers the truth about Tyler and realized that that power existed within himself saying: "To everybody there, I am Tyler Durden the Great and Powerful. God and father" (Palahniuk 199). This realization had the potential of forming into a Nietzschean reclamation of individual authority. However, the protagonist interpreted it as another form of abandonment, a disillusionment that brought him back to his state of solitude. His need for guidance (divine and/or human) persists until the end of the novel when he describes the mental asylum as heaven and

his doctor as God. Here, “He sees his therapist as God, again searching for an all-knowing figure to lead him” (Vickroy 74). The lack of both family and religion deprived the narrator from a clear sense of reference leading him to the general disorientation that gave birth to his dissociative identity disorder.

In the absence of a ready-made set of values, many people tend to find meaning in their profession, deriving both purpose and connection from it. In the fast-paced, profit-oriented capitalist world depicted by Palahniuk, however, career is nothing more than a passive participation in a giant money-making dehumanizing machine. The protagonist’s job accentuates his discomfort and alienation by surfacing the worst aspects of his culture.

Even without knowing the nature of the protagonist’s work, one can sense the disgust he feels towards the metallic, uninspiring environment he describes. The culture of efficiency is antithetical to beauty and it is difficult to feel enthusiasm in a high-tech slave camp. The protagonist describes his workplace as follows: “Everything is vertical blinds. Everything is industrial low-pile gray carpet spotted with little tombstone monuments where the PCs plug into the network. Everything is a maze of cubicles boxed in with fences of upholstered plywood” (Palahniuk 137-138). Low-cost materials and reduced spaces trigger a feeling of claustrophobia reducing the scope of his life. This feeling of “smallness” is heightened by the business trips he often takes. During his travels, everything he needs is presented in small servings. From soap to food to the very plane seats, everything is a miniature, single-use and often disposable object that mirrors the unimportance of his own life, “Tiny life. Tiny soaps. The tiny airline seats” (156). The cost effectiveness of airline companies

reflects the entirety of capitalism's tendency to prioritize profit over human value. As James Giles explains, "On planes and in airports, he feels that his existence has been miniaturized and destabilized, that everything surrounding him is designed to be discarded, to be thrown away. Such a throw-away life is the fate of those working in contemporary corporate America" (29). Naturally, such conditions could have been tolerated if the narrator's work conferred a sense of meaning. However, what he does for a living detaches him further from people and builds a feeling of guilt that cannot be remedied.

The responsibility of the narrator appears simple on the surface. He is charged with overseeing the company-produced cars that were deficient enough to cause them to crash and burn "with everyone trapped inside" (30). He must calculate the risk and recall the faulty model. However, human safety is far from being the main variable in his equation. The cost of recall procedures and the number of cars in circulation trump the risk of failure, forcing him to allow certain models to remain in use at the expense of human lives. To avoid the burden of thinking of the victims of the company's negligence, the narrator detaches himself from the process by reducing it to "simple arithmetic". He adopts a robotic attitude that disregards human involvement and focuses on calculations:

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

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

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

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

(Palahniuk 30)

The transformation of potential threats to human life into a mere calculation is not without consequences, "The Narrator's job duties encourage and even require him to be detached from his own emotional experience and coldly removed from concern for other people and their welfare" (Gold 26). His developing disregard for others is apparent when he wishes for plane crashes that would stir his ennui. It is no wonder, then, that the same individual would start, though through the disguise of an alter-ego, a violent insurrection against society. The job at the car recall company is a direct cause of his transformation because "[it] effectively reduces the value of human life to momentary figures and statistics, thus feeding the narrator's nihilistic impulses" (Wenley 47). We are confronted with a man who rejects the family as a possible antidote to alienation, cuts himself off from real human connection and regards others as nothing more than statistics. It is worth mentioning that the protagonist does feel a certain guilt that translates as self-hatred. His feeling of helplessness is also heightened by the fact that he is a slave to the corporate world. He is unable to break free from the very causes of his alienation. His rage against life, as far as his profession is concerned, is caused by a double shame; that of being part of a corrupt system, and that of being too weak to escape it. James Giles states: "While the narrator is tormented by such corporate cynicism and irresponsibility, he has no intention of becoming a whistle-blower. Another instance of his metaphoric

emasculatation, his complicity intensifies the profound self-hatred that fragments his identity” (28).

It is also clear that before Tyler Durden declares a cultural crusade, the protagonist, like most characters in the novel, had no greater purpose to dedicate his life to. His fascination with death was a symptom of such monotony: “I envied people dying of cancer. I hated my life. I was tired and bored with my job and my furniture, and I couldn’t see any way to change things” (Palahniuk 172). The “way to change things” proves to be the creation of Tyler who expresses and embodies the narrator’s thoughts with more clarity and assurance. Tyler explains the purposelessness of their lives saying: “we don’t have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives. We have a spiritual depression” (149). Lacking the courage to proclaim this, the narrator was, for most of his life, bound by such reality and forced to conform despite his muted resentment. Renee Lockwood claims that the state of purposelessness felt by the characters of *Fight Club* plagued Palahniuk’s generation, “With no wars to fight nor apparent enemies to destroy, men of Generation X² have become trapped in their corporate roles, void of a common mission and thus also void of purpose” (324). Before the advent of Tyler, the narrator drifted through life without a sense of direction and, as a product of his capitalist society, turned to consumerism to numb his discomfort. Yet, like many of his attempts to find solace, capitalism exacerbated rather than cured his descent towards nihilism.

² People born between the mid 1960’s and the early 1980’s.

3.2.2. The Emptiness of Consumerism

The narrator of *Fight Club* is beyond a mere consumer. He is a commodity fetishist who ingests furniture catalogues in the hope of finding an identity in a well-decorated apartment. In the same way that DeLillo's *Jack* seeks "life credit" from shopping, *Fight Club*'s narrator identifies himself with his possessions. He cherishes his "clever Njurunda coffee tables", his "Alle cutlery service" and "Aparanda Sofa", seeing in their superficial uniqueness a reflection of his own worth. They are all labeled, containing the name of a foreign designer to feign a sense of luxury. The narrator admits that his excessive shopping resembles an act of self-pleasure. He says: "The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue" (Palahniuk 43). Both acts of impulsive self-gratification are ultimately empty but addictive pushing him to spend his whole life creating a "holy shrine to Ikea" (Lockwood 330). Consumerism, despite being an efficient sedative for a while, began to lose its effect on the narrator as he slowly awakened to his reality.

Life in *Fight Club* is a set of pre-arranged options that individuals have to fall into. In many ways, it resembles the articles in the catalogues that offer the appearance of choice but contain a limited range of pre-designed items that millions of people already own. This realization is crucial for the narrator who discovers his lack of uniqueness resulting, later in the novel, in the creation of the creed that claims "You 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" (Palahniuk 143). This declaration took time to form in his mind, but we can easily see its growth

when looking at his opinion about consumerism. While discussing his expensive furniture, he says: “We all have the same Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern [...] We all have the same Rislampa/Har paper lamps made from wire and environmentally friendly unbleached paper” (43). The promise of individuality that these elaborate names give is deflated by the fact that they cause millions of other consumers to fall into a collective conformity. This further engrains the idea of the “smallness” of life with its limited options. As Peter Mathews clarifies, “Palahniuk depicts a recurring mainstream pattern of passive consumption in which life is lived out as a narrow set of default options” (83). It is clear that the narrator, who already suffered from low self-esteem, sank further into nihilism when he realized that he is nothing more than a conformist. He was deceived by the advertising culture that lures people into a false sense of uniqueness. His possessions initially gave him an identity but “ironically, the marketing of these products make them seem as if they are creating individuality, when in fact they entrench conformity” (Wenley 48).

In putting his faith in objects to create an identity, the narrator conferred too much power to his consumerist urges, plummeting him into a state of dependency. His despair throughout the novel is explained as the result of the inescapability from a life he hated. It is not only his condition as an isolated, purposeless and demoralized conformist that caused his identity disorder, but the fact that he was unable to change it. His addiction to consumerism only added to this fact by enslaving him to his lifestyle (and partially to his job since it financed his extravagant purchases). The control that the market has over people is apparent throughout the novel. Eduardo Mendieta compares it to an Orwellian totalitarian system. He writes: “We are watched

not by some shadow government, but by our commodities. The market polices us to make sure we are faithful consumers” (403). This idea is confirmed by the narrator who senses the power that his possessions have over him. After the accumulation of all desired objects, the well-decorated condominium became his prison, and the expensive furniture, his masters. He says: “Then you’re trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you” (Palahniuk 44). Unable to break free from this addiction using conventional means, the narrator turns to a more radical approach; the destruction of his apartment with a home-made bomb.

The explosion of the condo indicates the narrator’s overidentification with his belongings. Moreover, it reminds us of the fact that it is his need to conjure up his Jungian shadow in search of freedom that initiated a process of self-destruction. In other words, the explosion was an attempt to destroy parts of himself because he identified his possessions as extensions of his personality. This proves that consumerism not only bound the individual to the market’s will but also reduced his value to that of the objects he buys. People are as good as the things they own because “humans have been reduced to products or goods meant to fill a mechanical function in society, as the simulacra has taken over the body, removing it from anything original” (Jacobsen 44). At first, the narrator is unaware that his shadow, personified as Tyler, took the reign of his life while he slept. The destruction of the apartment was met with shock as he still identified with it. His response to the detective’s questions illustrates this point. He replies: “I loved my life. I loved that condo. I loved every stick of furniture. That was my whole life. Everything, the lamps, the chairs, the rugs were me. The dishes in the cabinets were me. The plants were me. The television was

me. It was me that blew up” (Palahniuk 110-111). The forceful detachment from his safe yet limiting lifestyle can be understood as a subconscious will to destroy. This is made evident by his prayer to Tyler saying “Deliver me from Swedish furniture. Deliver me from clever art” (46). A first-time reader of the novel can overlook this detail as long as he is oblivious of the fact that the narrator and Tyler are the same person. What cannot be overlooked, however, is the clear role that consumerism played in fueling the narrator’s nihilistic tendencies.

3.2.3. A Disorienting Double Reality

While the narrator’s consciousness is bound to a demoralizing and dehumanizing system that limits individuals to their market value, his subconscious is molded by the inauthenticity of media and pop culture. As a matter of fact, even the way he conceived Tyler Durden and his nihilistic odyssey is derived from a mediated idea of masculinity and heroism. At its genesis, however, his transformation was believed to be a rebellion against the Simulacra that governed his culture. Yet, as with everything else in his life, a rejection of a concept is an unintentional confession of his attachment to it. This proves that “*Fight Club* [...] advances a postmodern concern with the ubiquity of television and film as a mediating discourse between consciousness and reality” (Wenley 49). More specifically, when treating the narrator’s rejection of society, media and pop culture are understood to be additional forces that sparked his penchant for anarchy. This is reflected through Tyler’s words that express a resentment against the empty promises and the aestheticized reality of television. He says: “We are the middle children of history, raised by television to

believe that someday we'll be millionaires and movie stars and rockstars, but we won't. And we're just learning this fact" (Palahniuk 166). This statement reveals a harsh awakening, clearly from the narrator who, in his search for individuality and self-worth, identified himself with celebrities and movie characters in the same way as his expensive furniture. Holding grudges against the disappointing nature of culture would eventually lead to his moral disintegration because, as Jordan Peterson explains, "resentment breeds the desire for vengeance" (113), and since the Simulacra of media engulfs all parts of American society, his vengeance would be directed towards society as a whole.

Resentment, throughout the novel, is caused by the narrator's helplessness and inability to change his reality or attain his ideals. While he is influenced by media culture, the unattainability of the high standards it preaches reflects his own insecurities. For instance, while reflecting on his pathological relation to masculinity, one can see his disguised envy of physical strength. It is clear that the ideals of manliness were dictated by celebrities. This fact pushed millions of men to line up to gyms in order to sculpt their bodies to the images of their idols. The narrator's shadow, Tyler Durden, exposes the cult of appearances saying "The gyms you go to are crowded with guys trying to look like men, as if being a man means looking the way a sculptor or an art director says" (Palahniuk 50). As rage cannot be triggered by indifference, the refusal to conform to an image of masculinity reveals that the narrator's conception of it is purely influenced by media. Despite an apparent liberation from such influence, his subconscious was already dominated by TV and advertisement that contributed to the creation of the hyper-masculine, free-spirited

and excentric Tyler Durden. The 1999 movie adaptation of *Fight Club* directed by David Fincher illustrates this point perfectly by casting Bradd Pitt as Tyler. Being a pop culture icon, the actor ironically represents everything the novel tries to criticize, causing many viewers to idolize the antihero and miss the subtle criticisms made by Chuck Palahniuk. Advocators of the Tyler/Pitt persona are themselves falling under the sway of the Simulacra, letting their definition of heroism dictated by the unattainable ideals of cultural saints. In reality, “Durden is not a generational spokesperson; even within the fiction of *Fight Club*, he is a fictional character, a hallucination, another kind of copy of a copy of a copy, his own simulacrum” (Kavadlo 08). Yet many still view him as a postmodern Zarathustra. Both the narrator’s creation of Tyler and some readers/viewers attraction to him demonstrate the unshakable influence movies and pop culture play in American society. Eduardo Mendieta summarizes the public addiction to these forces saying:

The sounds, images, simulacra of media suffuse and infiltrate every social capillary. We are incapable of being alone with our thoughts; or, rather, we are afraid to be alone with our thoughts. We are sound-holics and image-holics, and our lives are accompanied to the soundtrack of movies, pop songs, and product jingles, as our lives flash by in picture perfect images. (403)

Television and movies are then undeniable contributors to the belief that contemporary American culture is a cause of nihilism. They add to the dehumanizing capitalism, the enslaving consumerism and the isolating social relationships that feed into the protagonist’s neurosis. However, despite his fixation on culture as a reason

for his fall, many complexes afflicted him well before his insomnia gave birth to a destructive alter-ego. His devaluation of social order and covert desire for anarchy and destruction started in his early youth shedding the light on deeper-seated psychological issues.

3.3. The Multifaceted Neurosis of a Nietzschean “Last Man”

There is a clear pattern of self-hatred that takes many forms in the novel. The narrator carries an unjustifiable guilt that breeds the desire for punishment, either by his own hands or administered by others. Other characters display signs of self-loathing such as Marla Singer who refers to herself as “infectious human waste” (61) and attempts to end her days by ingesting a fatal dose of Xanax. Cynthia Stark asserts that “all of the main characters in *Fight Club* are struggling with issues of self-worth” (Stark 63). Even Tyler Durden sees himself as “trash” and idealizes self-destruction despite the appearance of confidence (although his ideas can easily be understood as a reflection of the narrator’s inner thoughts). To explain the causes of destructive nihilism, the narrator will be taken as the main case study. A closer look into his psyche can reveal the origin of his pathological views of himself.

At the beginning of the novel, we are made aware of the narrator’s insomnia. The feeling of detachment it causes reflects his alienation and reveals his state of passive observer of his own life. He describes it as follows: “This is how it is with insomnia. Everything is so far away, a copy of a copy of a copy. The insomnia distance of everything, you can’t touch anything and nothing can touch you”

(Palahniuk 21). This half-conscious state shows life as a simulacrum and places him out of its sphere of influence. It serves as a metaphor for his dissociation with life and his desire to escape it; a point that is confirmed by the knowledge that his sleeping hours were replaced by a transformation into an alter ego whose main objective is to destroy the life he hated. In this case, Insomnia and DID³ go hand in hand and they are both indicators of a deeper malaise. The narrator's doctor urges him to look deeper within his mind, "Insomnia is just the symptom of something larger. Find out what's actually wrong" (19). The narrator, despite his lack of self-esteem is deeply egocentric, and blames the entirety of his ailments on society. He only seeks to appease not cure his condition by passive escapism such as crying in support groups and wishing for plane crashes, "That moment cures my insomnia with narcolepsy when we might die helpless and packed human tobacco in the fuselage" (25).

3.3.1. Infantilism and the Oedipal Complex

The narrator of *Fight Club* is an eternal child. It is revealed early with statements such as "I'm a thirty year old boy" (21). It is apparent in his pathological reliance on guidance and parental figures, a tendency that betrays his lack of individuation and a resentment against his absent father. The narrator's infantilism can also be detected in one of the methods he chose to cure his insomnia. In the testicular cancer support group, he found comfort in the soft embrace of Bob who, because of his former steroid abuse developed an emotional temper and grew big breasts on which the narrator pressed his face and cried. Jesse Kavadlo states: "Like a

³ Dissociative Identity Disorder

mother, Bob uses his enormous breasts, hugs, and love to give the narrator his release, allowing him first to cry, and then to sleep, both infantile needs” (09). The narrator rarely mentions his mother, putting his blame mostly on his father. Like everything else, it indicates his misplaced rage that concealed his need for maternal love. His reliance on Bob to cure his insomnia is then a clear indicator of the narrator’s lack of proper development into adulthood. Yet, instead of seeking the feminine energy that would cure him (found in Marla who could help him outgrow the need for a mother and gain emotional maturity), he fixated on the search for a paternal figure, first because of the culturally imposed views on masculinity and most importantly because of his association between God and father (following the Judeo-Christian tradition of using both words to describe the Divine). As Peter Mathews explains, “At the religious level, for instance, the disappearance of the father parallels the withdrawal of the traditional father-figure of God from the postmodern world” (99). Because of his lack of self-reliance, he believed that they both represented the higher authority he needed to direct his life. Consequently, since he was abandoned by his father (whom he needed despite the hatred and fear he felt towards him), he was inevitably abandoned by God as well. This generated a resentment that follows him throughout the novel and culminates in his (seen as Tyler’s) desire to anger God so that he turns his gaze towards him. The rage against the father (in both senses) is then an important theme in the novel and a principal cause of self-destruction. James Giles writes: “an essentially Freudian conflict with a simultaneously absent and threatening father lies at the core of the long-repressed anger that increasingly engulfs the narrator’s psyche as the novel progresses” (24).

The association between God and the absent father is itself a Nietzschean proclamation since the abandonment by these figures symbolize their metaphorical death. In other words, “throughout *Fight Club*, Palahniuk appropriates Christian imagery as a way of underscoring Nietzsche’s “God is Dead” maxim” (Wenley 55). This idea alone, with its many implications, would provide ample reasons for the narrator to initiate his descent towards anarchy, while reviving the divine power and conferring it to Tyler (and covertly to himself) can seem as a manifestation of the Will to Power. It is no wonder many readers view Tyler as a Nietzschean hero, neglecting the fact that he is the product of hallucinations and that his destructive solutions solve none of the issues his generation faced. However, the narrator’s despair and “loss of faith and meaning in a higher authority” (Wenley 56) forced him to simulate them in Tyler and when this latter took long to manifest, he returned to his paternal trauma. Following Tyler’s disappearance, he says, “I am Joe’s Broken Heart because Tyler’s dumped me. Because my father dumped me” (Palahniuk 134). These two sentences confirm his use of Tyler as a replacement for his father to whom he felt an incurable resentment and longing.

3.3.2. The Crisis of Masculinity

Closely related to the complex of paternal desertion, the narrator’s hindered development into adulthood also meant an inability to fully embrace manhood. This signals a crisis of masculinity that haunts the narrator throughout the novel. Here again, it is presented as a societal phenomenon but it is unclear if this idea is a projection of his own insecurities or a critique of American culture. What is certain is

that the narrator's passivity and overall weakness contradict his idealistic views of masculinity and plunges him deeper into guilt and self-hatred that he exteriorizes as rebellion. Other characters in the novel suffer from the same crisis that seems to develop from a decreasing value of men. The need for masculine values such as strength and heroism waned as society needed more obedient conformists than revolutionaries. This is expressed through the words of the mechanic who is introduced as the spokesman of Tyler and by extension the narrator's subconscious. He says: "I see the strongest and the smartest men who have ever lived [...] and these men are pumping gas and waiting tables" (Palahniuk 149). This statement mostly bemoans wasted potential but also reveals the weakened position of men. Andrew Hock Soon Ng notes: "In *Fight Club*, it is quite apparent that men have lost their place as the dominant sex, and have been reduced to a bunch of weak and vulnerable individuals" (118). Such weakness is symbolized by Bob's transformation from a strong athlete to a crying mother figure. He was degenderized by losing his muscular build to a more feminine outline that represents the feminization of men that the narrator felt. As Cynthia Stark explains, "we should see Bob as the literal embodiment of male victimization at the hands of an emasculating culture" (72). The fact that Bob was feminized because of a literal castration is itself another metaphor. He literally lost his male attributes making the distinction between male and female irrelevant among the undesirable members of support groups. Here, one must understand that "Castration is a recurring motif in *Fight Club*, indicative of a wider theme concerning the crisis of masculinity" (Wenley 52). Indeed, besides being a lingering fear in the narrator, it is later used by the members of Tyler's group as a terror tactic to silence

police officers. It is used against the narrator himself when he attempts to be a whistle blower. Whether a broad societal issue or the result of the narrator's selective attention, the theme of masculinity (and emasculation) remains a strong motivator for the project of cultural destruction.

An important part of the issue of masculinity is not only the narrator's weakness and expendability but also the paradox between his idealistic and media-influenced view on what a man should be and the reality of his life. The protagonist has a mixture of infantile and nostalgic ideas of masculine heroism. He imagines men to be the shapers of history, the fathers of civilization with their divine authority. However, the postmodern era, with its obsession with deconstruction, has devalued the ideal and returned men to their subdued reality. Brian Hart writes: "When heroic masculinity was exposed as a simulacrum, white men went from the top of the cultural hierarchy to trash objects" (02). This fact did not sit well with the narrator who continued to hold on to the hope of reviving primitive masculinity as seen in the creation of Tyler Durden and the establishment of spaces (such as fight clubs) in which these ideals could be lived freely but only on the fringe of society. The narrator's paradox forced him to live his masculine ideals only through psychological fragmentation because "The ideal and the real are so irreconcilable, so distant, that men can but only be rendered schizophrenic" (Mendieta 397). The narrator's personality disorder is then greatly linked to his irrational views on masculinity. It is nonetheless only one facet of his troubled self.

3.3.3. The Tentative Acceptance of Death Through its Glorification

Helplessness is not only faced when confronting society, but when considering one's position in the universe. The gradual deterioration of one's strength and the inevitability of death can explain Tyler's obsession with a premature glorious end. Knowing that Tyler represents the antithesis of the narrator's personality (or rather a projection of his desired yet unattainable self), the glorification of death betrays a suppressed fear. This is a recurrent theme in existential fiction but unlike DeLillo's Jack Gladney who spends his life avoiding death to the point of wishing to freeze the very plot of his life, the narrator of *Fight Club* chooses to confront it. However, as a product of the Simulacra, it is not the reality of death that he seeks but an aestheticized version that would procure him a feeling of importance. Tyler promises him a place in eternity with statement such as "In death we become heroes" (Palahniuk 178). At the end of the novel, he refers to suicide as "Martyrdom" adding: "...not like death as a sad, downer thing, this was going to be death as a cheery, empowering thing" (203). Here, "His evocation of Tyler Durden is, in part, a desperate attempt to make death attractive" (Giles 30). The narrator beautifies death, making it more tolerable and sometimes more desirable than his lifeless existence. He even attributes to it the same awe-inspiring qualities often associated with life. In statements such as "The amazing miracle of death, when one second you're walking and talking, and the next second, you're an object" (Palahniuk 146), he reverses an expression commonly associated with birth. This is done partly to illustrate the narrator's devaluation of life but also to reveal his efforts to transcend its end.

The subsequent creation of secret orders such as Fight Club is itself a rejection of life, but also a covert rejection of death. The narrator does not only want to destroy his despised present, he also wishes to outlast (at least spiritually) his inevitable end in which he becomes nothing more than “cold fertilizer, worm buffet” (35). The repeated mantras that Tyler teaches the members of Project Mayhem constantly remind them of the insignificance of human life that is maximized in death. Nonetheless, it is not done in a passive, defeatist manner but as a way to urge them to take drastic action normally hindered by the attachment to life. In other words, when life is a meaningless hamster-wheel that leads to decay, destructive nihilism becomes a way to survive. As Tyler Durden preaches, “we’ll be legend. We won’t grow old” (11). With the project of “making history”, “he attempts to transcend mortality through his place as the creator of fight club and Project Mayhem” (Hartt 03). Consequently, the narrator’s obsession with death does not come from a desire to reach it but from the fear that it would further cement his place as an insignificant living object. Summoning Tyler, on the other hand, substituted its fatalistic meaning by a promise of immortality, an objective that would appease the narrator’s fear of irrelevance in both life and death.

3.4. Fragmentation of the Self as the Manifestation of a Repressed Will to Power

At this point, the narrator’s nihilistic approach to life caused by an alienating society and a trauma-riddled psyche is clear. He viewed his situation as incurable leading him to proclaim his desperation with the iconic phrase “losing all hope was

freedom” (Palahniuk 22). It is true that he was surrounded by a plethora of distractions such as the temporary solace he found in support groups but his comfort was perverse and feeding on other people’s pain. Indeed, what prompted his relief, apart from the motherly support he found in Bob’s embrace, was seeing his emotional pain overshadowed by physical suffering. As Peter Mathews explains, “Their physical shortcomings reflect his own feelings of spiritual emptiness, and thus the groups become a release mechanism for his frustrated religious energy” (89). In addition to the paling of existential angst when compared to real suffering, the narrator’s fear of death was cured by the imminent demise of the members of support groups. He touched on a feeling similar to *White Noise*’s Siskind’s theory of “killers and diers” whereby the assured death of others guaranteed his own survival. His parasitical enjoyment of support groups was short lived, brought to an abrupt end by Marla Singer who, seeking the same release, used lies and trickery to abuse other people’s sympathy. This woke him up to his own inauthenticity and the fragility of his position that relied mostly on deception. What the narrator needed was a complete transcendence from his life. Since he was the product of the Judeo-Christian tradition, he viewed such deliverance as only possible through a savior; a guide that would satisfy his need for a God/father figure while helping destroy his former self in search of a higher meaning. This signals the birth of Tyler Durden.

3.4.1. Tyler as a Revelation of the Unconscious Shadow

It is crucial to repeat that Tyler does not represent the author’s answers to existential alienation. As Mathews explains, “Tyler Durden does not speak directly

for Palahniuk any more than Heathcliff is the mouthpiece of Emily Brontë” (82). Despite the seemingly liberating ideas of his antihero, Chuck Palahniuk is not a self-help guru and *Fight Club* is far from being a Nietzschean parable. Tyler is the result of the fragmented mind of a character unable to crystalize a functioning identity. This is caused by the fact that his views on life are either absurd or stemming from unresolved trauma, and as James Giles affirms, “...irrationality in itself can hardly form the basis of a stable identity” (23). Tyler is then a hallucination based in irrationality and so his ideas must be taken with a grain of salt. His nature is the result of the narrator’s belief in a metamorphosis that would help him express a desired yet feared self. While this transformation remained subconscious throughout the bulk of the novel, it is hinted at in statements such as “If you can wake up in a different place. If you can wake up in a different time. Why can’t you wake up as a different person?” (Palahniuk 157). Tyler’s ideas are then the narrator’s repressed thoughts and the biased solutions to his own problems.

The first thing to know is that Tyler Durden is an answer to a prayer. His pleas imitate the religious/Christian tone of invoking deliverance but instead of being addressed to God, his absence of spirituality oblige him to direct them towards a self-made savior. He says: “Oh, Tyler, please rescue me. [...] Deliver me from Swedish furniture. Deliver me from clever art. May I never be complete. May I never be content. May I never be perfect. Deliver me, Tyler, from being perfect and complete” (46). Tyler’s aims of destruction can be understood from this prayer since his very invocation implied a rejection of “perfection” and “completeness”. In calling for Tyler, the narrator was merely conjuring up courage to start a process of self-

destruction for the sake of “feeling something”. Since he regarded himself as incompetent and weak, he needed to transfer that ability to somebody else, but heroes were all but instinct in a conformist society, requiring him to search for such individual within his own imagination. This latter produced a man that possessed every quality the narrator admired but lacked: “I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world. Tyler is capable and free, and I am not” (174). One might ask why the narrator felt the need to project these qualities into someone else if he was capable of exhibiting them himself. Apart from his self-loathing that prevents him from assuming the role of a hero, the protagonist also longed for a father figure due to his unresolved Oedipal complex. He was also still a Nietzschean “last man” so he needed a guide to follow and a semi-divine power to look up to. Tyler filled both positions while saving the narrator (and arguably his generation) from the empty consumerist routine. Andrew Hock Soon Ng notes: “In bringing “salvation” to men, Tyler’s underlying motive is to rescue the paternal-figure by transfiguring it, with himself as the new god and father to a generation of rejuvenated men” (128-129).

Although he is perceived as a generational savior, Tyler remains, I argue, a selfish response to the narrator’s needs. In addition to replacing the absent father, he is also created to compensate the narrator’s crisis of masculinity and pursue what he desired but lacked the courage to claim. In the case of Marla Singer, for example, the protagonist’s attraction towards her is clear from their first encounter although his admiration is disturbed by his resentment and buried under a façade of indifference,

possibility in imitation of his parents' relationship. Marla, however, had a unique aura and a level of boldness and bluntness (all masculine traits in the narrator's mind) that rendered him more self-aware to his inadequacies. The two created an image of the gender reversal the narrator feared, with the woman standing confidently, smoking and dictating her terms, while the man followed passively and swallowed his frustrations in silence. Tyler, on the other hand, was able to "tame" Marla with his excessive machismo (although their relationship remained physical, contrary to Marla's wishes and hindering the protagonist's emotional healing). In this case, the narrator built a persona that would embolden him enough to deserve her, "In brief, he [Tyler] is the match for Marla's bold audaciousness and eccentricity that the Narrator is too uncertain and intimidated to dare to be" (Gold 23).

Beyond the desire to have a seemingly unattainable relationship, the narrator saw in Tyler an overall cure to his "feminization". In their acts of violence, starting from a solitary fight in a parking lot to the destruction of his office with his boss inside, the narrator wished to retrieve the courage and strength to reclaim his lost masculinity. Tyler punishes the narrator and afflicts physical pain such as burning his hand with lye to exorcise the feminine out of him. Even the final scene in which he attempts suicide while pleading for Tyler to kill him can be understood as "the restored 'male-ideal' is literally trying to kill off the 'feminized' modern man" (Jacobsen 29). What the narrator fails to realize is that, since his views on masculinity are irrational, their newly-appointed advocator will be the manifestation of irrationality. Tyler will only aggravate the narrator's issues because "Tyler Durden is the alter ego of an impossible masculinity. He is the American male on steroids,

precisely what American males must be cured of' (Mendieta, *The Avatars of Masculinity* 57). His views and approach to regaining control are then a clear testimony of the protagonist's pathology.

Tyler's solutions spring from the protagonist's rage and as such, they are presented as a rejection of everything that came before the "awakening". This rejection is not a mature ascension towards a higher purpose but a resentment against the causes of the fall and a desire to reduce everything to nothingness. Tyler's proposition was then a response to the narrator's feeling of empty completeness and a promise that only when everything is destroyed can one rise from the ashes: "At the time, my life just seemed too complete, and maybe we have to break everything to make something better out of ourselves" (Palahniuk 52). Self-destruction was then the only way to salvation, and the obliteration of all aspects of society that caused passivity and weakness was the road to heaven. Tyler's approach resembled the lifestyle of medieval ascetic monks who sought atonement through self-flagellation, and enlightenment through seclusion and the abandonment of worldly pleasures. Indeed, religious references that confirm this parallel can be detected even in the way the protagonist describes his need for destruction: "And if I don't fall all the way, I can't be saved. Jesus did it with his crucifixion thing. I shouldn't just abandon money and property and knowledge. This isn't just a weekend retreat. I should run from self-improvement, and I should be running toward disaster" (70). As seen in this passage, the narrator did not only wish to escape his safe hedonistic lifestyle, he prayed for the opposite. He longed for the same destruction he imagined while travelling on airplanes. Tyler's ideals are built upon this boredom-induced desire for disaster,

explaining his violent methods. Self-destruction is taken up as new gospel destined to save the men who suffer from the same psychological ailments as the narrator. Cynthia Stark explains: “Clearly, Tyler is not out simply to destroy himself; he endorses self-destruction for all (or for all men) as an ideal. He sees self-destruction as the necessary means to cleansing oneself of the toxins accumulated by consumption, or, to switch metaphors, he sees it as the means of ridding oneself of the disease of consumption” (65). It is for this reason that the first interference in the protagonist’s life was the explosion of his apartment with its new appliances and expensive furniture. It is a literal answer to his prayer “deliver me from Swedish furniture” (Palahniuk 46) and the beginning of a process he calls “hitting rock bottom” (70).

“Hitting rock bottom” is the complete destruction of all attachments to life, from the need for safety to the possession of material goods. This process advanced in crescendo starting by living in the decrepit house on Paper Street to the destruction of his office (thus ending corporate monopoly of power) to the project of annihilating society as a whole. Indeed, destruction did not stop at the individual level. As seen earlier, the protagonist blamed his culture for his state of alienation and emasculation. The solution was to “...break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world” (Palahniuk 125). To this aim, Tyler chose the National Museum as his first major target to begin effacing the very memory of their culture. To destroy civilization, they needed “to blast the world free of history” (124). This forced apocalypse symbolizes the epitome of “hitting rock bottom” and the only way known to Tyler to salvage an already doomed existence.

The ideas of complete destruction make sense when understanding that the very creation of Tyler Durden depended on the narrator's nihilism. It is then the natural development for the alter ego to preach for the acceptance of the "nihil". As Hock Soon Ng writes, "Born of nothingness, he will now encourage an embracing of nothingness as the "way" to self-redemption" (125). Yet nothingness, from its very definition negates creation, meaning that Tyler was unable to build any valuable system that would replace the culture he swore to destroy, nor could he provide the narrator with a stable identity. He helped him surmount his fear for a while (until Bob's death brought him back to reality) and gave him a glimpse of life by nearing death. However, as the narrator said when describing the fight club Tyler created, "nothing was solved when the fight was over, but nothing mattered" (Palahniuk 53). Tyler pursued nihilism for its own sake, fueled by the anger and resentment of his creator. Despite his speeches and philosophical gimmicks, he provided no answers to the narrator or his generation. Many readers who relate to the narrator were also swayed by Tyler's heroic aura that covered his impotence. Eduardo Mendieta affirms that Tyler (and the novel) is a parody that postures as a serious work, "However", he continues, "although many readers and some critics took the parody seriously, what Durden preaches cannot be taken for the remedy" (Mendieta, *The Avatars of Masculinity* 58).

The narrator, despite his apparent ignorance of Tyler's nature (a device used both to create suspense and to emphasize the narrator's fragmented psyche), showed signs of a hidden awareness of his alter-ego's flaws but took conscious precautions to shield himself from the truth. His ignorance was self-inflicted because it gave him the

comfort of living his messianic fantasy. As Laurie Vickroy states, “Tyler’s existence depends upon the protagonist’s unawareness” (72). To defend himself from awareness, the narrator’s first action was to invent a vow of secrecy to avoid discussing Tyler with others. At this point, we know that the narrator was mostly solitary and it is from his seclusion that his hallucination developed. People, on the other hand, could break his illusion, starting with Marla who offered awareness from their very first encounter (by exposing his fakery and lies in the support groups). To prevent her from ruining his fantasy, Tyler and the narrator came to an arrangement. Tyler says: “Don’t ever talk to her about me. Don’t talk about me behind my back. Do you promise? [...] If you ever mention me to her, you’ll never see me again” (Palahniuk 72). What is interesting about this exchange is that threatening to leave was not caused by Tyler’s pride or need for privacy, it is a promise of a literal disappearance because Marla would simply reveal the truth causing the illusion to evaporate. The need for secrecy is also used in the fight clubs he creates where “The first rule of fight club is you don’t talk about fight club” (96). The reality is that people talked about fight club, constantly increasing the number of its members. The only figure that still required silence was its founder. This is apparent when the narrator goes around asking about Tyler after his long disappearance. The members smile awkwardly and ask if it is a test, fearing to break the code by revealing the truth. By forcing himself and others to avoid discussing Tyler, the narrator protected himself from awakening from the illusion and from seeing his savior’s flaws and empty violence that only destroyed his life instead of elevating it. Vickroy explains: “He defends himself against this knowledge through most of the novel, keeping

himself and Tyler separate through the secrecy rules of fight club. Thus he can avoid others' opinions of Tyler, his destructiveness, or the illusion of connection he provides" (72). Throughout the novel, the protagonist chose to cling to ignorance to fuel his imaginary salvation. He purposefully escaped awareness and looked up to Tyler for guidance. This latter thrived in transgression and chose violence as his first response to the narrator's discomfort; an approach that proved stimulating at first but ultimately meaningless.

The narrator's first mode of escaping his alienation was quickly dismantled by Marla's presence. The second, however, survived thanks to his conscious efforts to protect his ignorance. Under the reign of Tyler, a new method of transcending the futility of life was introduced, that of physical violence. In *Fight Club*, however, Chuck Palahniuk subverted the notion of violence. In the same way that death was celebrated over life, physical pain was presented as a cure rather than a punishment. It is true that he uses a lot of descriptions of graphic violence that might seem excessive but it is done for a purpose. Besides soliciting the reader's emotional response through shock and horror, Palahniuk also wanted to demonstrate the tyrannical and dehumanizing nature of such a path. For instance, he drew parallels between Nazism and Tyler's revolution by making him cook soap out of human fat, a method that "...echoes the Nazis' practice of making soap out of concentration camp victims" (Giles 39). Cure through violence demanded a disregard for human value and the need to sacrifice both the self and others. Peter Mathews writes: "The images of soap that pervade the pages of *Fight Club* are emblematic of this fascist ideal. "Soap and human sacrifice go hand in hand," says Tyler" (96). The language used by the

characters of the novel also reveals the devaluation of human life that developed in the narrator's mind. When stealing the liposuction fat that Marla received from her mother to do filler injections, they referred to it as "Marla's mother" saying "We made soap out of it. Her. Marla's mother" (Palahniuk 93). The "it" and the "her" are interchangeable showing no difference between the object and the person. Marla herself did not differentiate between the two screaming "You boiled my mother!" (93), a statement that showed that she suffered from the same nihilistic visions as the person who wronged her. The protagonist is then insensitive to human life and it is an important detail to understand his fixation on violence. Destruction and self-destruction of the body were not a taboo; they were means to an end.

As with everything else, Tyler's empty promises begin as liberating proclamations. In this case, Tyler claims that by embracing violence, one inevitably detaches himself from the paradigm of safety that characterizes his passive culture. In other words, if the masses rush towards self-preservation, rebels must walk in the opposite direction. In this case, "Violence and fighting appear as the way in which the subject will shut himself out of the world. His denying the world comes as the denial of the safety of the subject" (Kerakasis and Lavilla 155). It is then presented as an act of rebellion and as a way to reject the world. However, as seen earlier, Tyler is a response to the narrator's troubled psychology rather than a freedom fighter. As such, his use of violence reveals deeper, more personal issues the narrator tries to numb. As Mendieta explains, "Sought out pain and danger are palliatives for a deeper and graver sufferings: a void of meaning, a lack of direction" (Mendieta, *Surviving American Culture* 396).

Violence is used as a sedative to block off the narrator's dissatisfaction with reality. According to Laurie Vickroy, it is a common method followed by trauma victims who forget their troubles while they focus on physical pain. Through this practice, "...temporary relief as self-inflicted bodily pain trumps psychological pain in the short term" (66). In the novel, this can be observed when Tyler burns the protagonist's hand with lye. Tyler insists that the narrator focuses on the pain and avoids drifting away with meditation which he considers a sign of weakness and attachment to safety. For a moment, there is no solitude, no alienation, only the pain of the burn. While the narrator appears resistant to this idea, he quickly adopts it as a drug par excellence. His first fight with Tyler, for instance, if we look beyond the illusion, is the image of a man beating himself to a pulp. Vickroy continues, "As a symptom of trauma, his self-mutilation acts as a means of self-soothing, or a release from mental anguish..." (66). In both cases of self-inflicted violence, the narrator relies on Tyler to administer the pain. The narrator's weakness prevents him from committing fully to his actions, and his passivity and reliance on guidance force him to allocate this power to another. This, too, is a common method used by trauma patients who resort to the creation of an alter ego, with a more assertive personality, so that they can passively receive pain that they see as deserved punishment to soothe their self-hatred. According to Armando Favazza, trauma patients often have "[a] primary passive identity and alternate identities with contrasting names and characteristics. In at least a third of cases, self-mutilation may be inflicted as a punishment by one alternate personality or another" (qtd. in Vickroy 67). The narrator of *Fight Club* also suffers from self-loathing and most of his self-mutilation is a

mixture of a radical anesthetic against existential angst and a justifiable self-punishment to revalue himself. In the case of the hand burning for instance, Tyler's treatment (in the sense of behavior and proposed cure) was accepted as a fair punishment to the narrator's "pathetic" character. With time, however, the narrator moves away from self-inflicted pain and seeks it in (and inflicts on) others. With the creation of fight club, violence takes another dimension, beyond mere punishment or escapism (although both ends remain active needs throughout the novel).

3.4.2. Fight Clubs and Finding Meaning through the "Realness" of Pain

Despite being a projection of a fragmented mind, Tyler Durden suffers from a savior complex. He operates as an enlightened being freeing men from their social and cultural shackles. It is with this mentality that Fight Club was first founded. If we consider him as an independent being, he appears to propose liberation to all men, regardless of the narrator's needs. For instance, he offers his radical (often unsolicited) solutions to strangers as it is the case with Raymond, a minimart clerk who got stuck in complacency instead of pursuing his dream of becoming a veterinarian. Tyler's cure was to awaken Raymond through a direct confrontation with death. He held him at gun point, threatening to shoot if he refused to quit his soulless job and pursue his passion. He took note of his address to keep the threat alive. Tyler says: "Get out of here, and do your little life, but remember I'm watching you, Raymond Hessel, and I'd rather kill you than see you working a shit job for just enough money to buy cheese and watch television" (Palahniuk 155). The whole scene appears contradictory to Tyler's beliefs that proclaimed self-destruction and rejected

self-improvement. But when seen in the light of his savior complex and his hatred towards the zombifying effects of corporate America, Tyler's actions become clearer. Robert Bennet writes: "In fact, it is precisely because Jack and Tyler are aware of the profound and dehumanizing strength of "institutional constraints" that they believe that Raymond can only recover his authentic individual freedom through an existential confrontation with death" (70). It is this fascinating duality that fuels the novel. Under the dissociative identity disorder paradigm, while one personality seeks to drown its own existential anguish, the other is proclaiming an overt war against society. These opposing forces end up fighting for dominion by the end of the novel, resulting in the narrator's attempted suicide. When fight clubs were first created, however, the narrator was unaware of such difference and remained completely under Tyler's control. It is then through Tyler's perspective that we will explore the creation of fight clubs.

At face value, a cult that urges men to abandon themselves to violence and to revel in their self-destruction (and the destruction of others) appears to signify a complete acceptance of nihilism. According to Stephen Wenly, "Fight Club is about embracing nothingness, a cathartic emptying of the self by submitting to the primitive urge of violence" (51). Yet, for Tyler, it is more than mere "emptying of the self". The adoption of "nothingness" as a mode of being (at least temporarily) is a self-proclamation of freedom, a detachment from a world that had wronged men. It is for this reason that when entering fight club, members must remove their clothes to cut all ties with the outside world (a method that was replaced by wearing the same black clothes in Project Mayhem). While they are limited by their social status, their money,

their past, Fight Club provides them an opportunity to be equal. There, they are strong, respected and unapologetically masculine (a quality no longer acceptable in their daily lives). In many ways, this idea presents fighting as a vitalizing rather than destructive practice. It echoes the “dare to be dangerous” moto. If we consider the narrator’s crisis of masculinity, Fight Club offers a chance to reclaim it through an unashamed display of primitive masculine heroism. Tyler did not only liberate men from the constraint of their social hierarchy; he recovered their lost value. Masculinity transformed from “cultural trash” to a valuable trait because “Tyler makes contemporary men useful again through Project Mayhem and fight club” (Hartt 04).

Men, at the image of the narrator, were suffering from weakness and fear, all seen by Tyler as feminine traits. Fight clubs were a method of breaking free from these constraints. At this point, one might detect signs of misogyny in Tyler’s ideas. It is true that women are associated with deficiency, or the chaotic passivity in the Yin and Yang duality. James Giles comments on this tendency saying “Undoubtedly, a rejection, even a hatred, of women is present in the text; but whether it endorses a misogynistic vision or merely depicts it as a central aspect of the narrator’s damaged psyche is less clear” (26). Since Tyler is mainly a result of the narrator’s frustration, a more logical interpretation would be that misogyny is not a theme advocated by the author but a clear indication of the narrator’s resentment towards women (hated mother, lack of authority, sexual frustration and inability to have a partner...). With this in mind, Tyler hopes to liberate men from those negative feminine traits through physical violence. Cynthia Stark explains that “physical suffering, at the hands of

other men, is the means by which men are reunited with their masculinity. They must have the femininity literally beaten out of them” (68).

When engaged in the ritualistic violence of fight clubs, the narrator also feels that everything else pales in comparison. His worries disappear as he develops a sense of indifference, “After fight club, you’re so relaxed, you just cannot care” (Palahniuk 139). Technically, what Tyler offered was nothing more than a soothing drug similar to crying in support groups, but for the narrator, it is a freeing experience. He even equates it to a spiritual deliverance whereby fighting replaces prayers: “There’s hysterical shouting in tongues like at church, and when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved” (51). His salvation, however, was short lived. The problem with drugs, of all sorts, is that human beings build tolerance towards them. Similarly, while a punch in the face was initially sufficient to liberate the narrator from his worldly worries, he eventually felt the need for something larger. After a new member with a smooth “angel face” arrived at fight club, the narrator unleashed an uncontrollable rage and beat him to a pulp until his “teeth stuck through his lips” (123). At that moment, the narrator developed a liking for inflicting violence, and to “destroy something so completely” marked the beginning of his interest in a larger scale destruction. At this stage, Tyler Durden responds accordingly with the creation of an order that transcends mere escapism through violence or the reclamation of a lost masculinity. He creates Project Mayhem, an organized group vowed to vandalism (that evolved to terrorism) in order to bring society to its knees and to destroy all signs of modernity in the hope of returning to a simpler more genuine mode of living.

3.4.3. “Putting One’s Hand to the Plough”: Active Nihilism in Project Mayhem

The destruction of the young man’s innocent face awakened the narrator’s self-hatred. In a burst of jealousy against the very world that shunned him, his pathological self-esteem expanded to include everything considered worth preserving. His nihilism became reliant on a generalized reduction to nothingness that would sooth his resentment towards the unlived life:

I wanted to destroy everything beautiful I’d never have. Burn the Amazon rain forests. Pump chlorofluorocarbons straight up to gobble the ozone. Open the dump valves on supertankers and uncap offshore oil wells. I wanted to kill all the fish I couldn’t afford to eat, and smother the French beaches I’d never see. I wanted the whole world to hit bottom. (Palahniuk 123)

The narrator’s weakness, however, only allowed him to voice his frustrations without the necessary vitality to combat them. As always, he relied on his savior to execute his wishes without the weight of guilt or responsibility. Tyler Durden, being omnipresent in the narrator’s subconscious, redirected his attention towards society. Self-destruction was no longer sufficient; a more political aim was needed. Andrew Hock Soon Ng notes: “And because his personal philosophy promotes the negation of the self in order to transcend, his political one would necessarily follow suit” (131). This means that if the salvation of the individual relied on self-destruction, the only way to save the world is to reduce it to ashes. For this aim, Project Mayhem was born.

Project Mayhem is built in the Paper Street house the narrator rented after the obliteration of his apartment. Potential members who knock at their door were first discouraged to join, a method to test their resilience. Those who remain are asked to shave their heads and wear identical black clothes. They were all obedient to Tyler's commands, operating like an army. Their readiness to execute orders owed them the name Space Monkeys, unthinkingly pressing buttons and pulling levers. In their new headquarter, they would busy themselves making soap and reciting mantras that would remind them of their insignificance in the world. They would repeat phrases like "I am the all-singing, all-dancing crap of this world," the space monkey tells the mirror. "I am the toxic waste by-product of God's creation" (Palahniuk 169). They kept no worldly possessions except the clothes on their back and five hundred dollars to pay for their own funeral, an accepted eventuality. Tyler gave them regular assignments that started with simple acts of vandalism such as sabotaging bank machines. Their project increased in intensity as they started fabricating home-made explosives with the aim of blowing up the Parker-Morris building that would crush down the national museum, thus beginning the process of eradicating history.

Project Mayhem is fundamentally a cult of frustrated men desiring a common scape goat to evacuate their anger. According to Renee Lockwood, "[cults] are thus largely created when a significant number of people are suffering from similar unresolved problems" (323). This indicates that in Palahniuk's world, many men shared the same frustrations and were all desperate to find a common goal to drown them. The anger against culture, beauty and history was a way to avoid facing their own unresolved issues, and direct their hatred towards a physical object they would

destroy. After all, undirected violence does not die away, it builds up and destroys its own subject (see the narrator's self-mutilation) or erupts into generalized chaos. It is only natural to focus one's hatred outwardly. This method is not exclusive to cults, the very society they try to eradicate thrived on the designation of a common enemy instead of facing its own internal problems. James Giles writes:

In order to control the threat of reciprocal violence, societies have arbitrarily chosen sacrificial victims on whom to practice violence [...] Of course, Americans still attempt to do so; thus the popularity of conspiracy theories, the legalized persecution of illegal immigrants, and the racism that lingers in American society. (32)

This statement does not only expose the illegitimacy of their aims but also the perpetuation of a negative cycle that makes them no different from the world they negate. Yet, their monastic way of life and their idealized goal provided them with a sense of righteousness and purpose, the very things they lacked but desired in their daily lives.

Beyond the strange chants and the complete subjugation to a charismatic leader, there are other indications that Project Mayhem was more of a cult than a militant group. Lockwood draws parallels between the space monkeys and ascetic monks saying "With the abandonment of their worldly possessions, the decision to live together as a community in Tyler's derelict house forsaking the outside world, the experience of Fight Club members directly parallels that of medieval Christian monks" (331). As with their focus on death as the only path to heroism, they resembled other real-life cults such as the *Heaven's Gate* movement that was

operational around the time of this novel's publication. As with all cults, the members could find an emotional comfort (though based on deception) that could not be found elsewhere, and Tyler's promises (resembling all cult leaders) offered them the hope of salvation. Again, following the *modus operandi* of cults, Tyler's rule was deceptive and tyrannical. While he grew in power attaining the status of "God and Father", the Space Monkeys were made servile and expendable. Initially, "The goal was to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history. We, each of us, can take control of the world" (Palahniuk 122), but ultimately, they became indistinguishable cogs doing the bidding of their master in the same way they operated in the corporate capitalist world. It was the first indication of the inevitable failure of adopting destructive nihilism as a way of finding meaning.

3.5. The Failure of Destructive Nihilism

3.5.1. The Descent into Tyranny

The initial problem one can detect with Project Mayhem is its tendency to blame civilization for modern men's plight. Tyler's resentment is based on the somewhat naïve idea that without the pressures of cultural and social constructs, man would be free to thrive and regain his power. Selecting the national museum as a major target with the aim of erasing and/or rewriting history illustrates this goal. Tyler's plan relied on the idealization of the past and the desire to return to it through the destruction of the present. This approach is not new in history. It is a reformulation of the concerns that gave birth to fascism. Paul Kennet, for example,

equates Tyler's project to Neo-Nazism. He writes: "In similar fashion [to Neo-Nazi violence in Germany] Project Mayhem emerges from the fight clubs, and transforms the revolutionary experience into a symptom of the Narrator's nostalgia for what, or rather, who, he might have been under a firm patriarchy" (55). Those groups themselves recreated the same pattern that motivated the ideology they tried to revive. Indeed, even Hitler wished for the retrieval of Germany's past glory and started his campaign as a socialist seeking reforms (Mathews 94). In the same way, Project Mayhem's fate was inevitable because it built its foundation on the same dissatisfaction with the present and the passionate goal of returning to the past by any means necessary. As argued before, the longing for a glorious past where the narrator would find strong leadership (to compensate for his absent father) and exert his power (a cure for his masculinity complex) are some of the initial impulses that created Tyler. Yet, under Project Mayhem, these issues took the form of heroic ideals. The zeal of idealism, however, quickly effaced the initial promises Tyler made to his followers. Stephen Wenley notes: "Tyler's philosophy is too idealistic and unfocused, however, and it swiftly produces a fascist organization which ends up negating many of its initial goals" (60).

The members of Project Mayhem started as impotent men seeking purpose. They hoped to find strength and dignity in the hardening yet comforting living conditions of the Paper Street Soap Company. What they found, on the other hand, was a worse form of insignificance. Though unaware of this fact, their individual value was reduced to a minimum by transforming them into indistinguishable worker ants. Here, "Palahniuk shows how the transformation of a liberatory discourse into an

ideological doxa ultimately alienates the very people it should be winning over” (Mathews 100). Under the oppressive reign of Tyler, they lost all signs of individuality and were reduced to a “...clockwork of silent men with the energy of trained monkeys, cooking and working and sleeping in teams. Pull a lever. Push a button” (Palahniuk 130). Even their death became insignificant with the promise of postmortem glory reminiscent of terrorist groups that entice their members with the promise of a martyr’s heaven. All that mattered was the narrator’s selfishness disguised under Tyler’s unshakeable command. Paul Kennet explains: “Tyler’s promises that participation in Project Mayhem will teach all the men involved how to become their own masters, but the space monkeys are forever doing Tyler’s bidding, they are contributing to his personal power by relinquishing their own” (56). The men of project Mayhem did not only lose all agency over their own minds by becoming obedient slaves but also lost all distinctiveness. The very things they rebuked society for were reproduced with a higher intensity. For instance, the narrator voiced his dissatisfaction with the conformity that corporate and consumerist America created. From the bland architecture of his office to the small portions of food and soap in airports, to owning the same furniture, his life looked like a replica of the same uninspiring conditions of middle-class contemporary men. One might assume that Fight Club and Project Mayhem would free him from these limitations. However, since those conditions were the only things he knew throughout his life, he ended up subconsciously reproducing them. Tyler’s condition for joining Project Mayhem was as follows: “Two black shirts. Two black pair of trousers. One pair of heavy black shoes. Two pair of black socks and two pair of plain underwear. One heavy black

coat. This includes the clothes the applicant has on his back. One white towel. One army surplus cot mattress. One white plastic mixing bowl” (Palahniuk 127-128). What seems to be an imitation of military discipline is nothing more than a conscious abandonment of individuality and a return to a different kind of conformity. As Jesse Kavadlo observes, “In their brutality and futility, Tyler’s followers, the nameless and faceless Space Monkeys, blur the lines between rebellion and conformity with the zeal of conversion, discarding tie-wearing, Starbucks-sipping, and IKEA-shopping by becoming mantra-repeating black shirts” (13). Even the way Project Mayhem was organized, with its specific committees, printed lists and homework assignments, is a projection of the narrator’s past life:

...Each committee meets on a different night:

Arson meets on Monday.

Assault on Tuesday.

Mischief meets on Wednesday.

And Misinformation meets on Thursday.

Organized Chaos. The Bureaucracy of Anarchy. You figure it out.

Support groups. Sort of.

So Tuesday night, the Assault Committee proposed events for the upcoming week, and Tyler read the proposals and gave the committee its homework.

(Palahniuk 119)

The narrator’s life accompanies him in his hallucinations. Tyler, despite being the product of his wishes, was also tainted by the deeply rooted habits imposed by his

corporate job and conformist lifestyle. James Giles writes: “That Project Mayhem is modeled on the corporate world demonstrates that the narrator has been co-opted by that world and that, ironically, he does not resist it in his fantasy of rebellion” (36). All Tyler was able to do is to reverse the meaning of conformity making it more desirable in the same way he glorified death to render it more tolerable. In other words, “Tyler’s solution to corporate conformity and immorality, however, is anti-corporate conformity and immorality” (Kavadlo 14). Earlier in the novel, the narrator was quick to realize that fighting, despite being a good temporary release from life’s pressures, was ultimately useless and solved none of his issues. Similarly, Project Mayhem’s nihilistic and destructive approach to life was insufficient to create any form of meaning. On the contrary, it only exacerbated his fears and revealed the uselessness of Tyler’s ideas.

3.5.2. The Meaninglessness of Inauthenticity

Fight Club’s narrator, much like the characters of *White Noise* discussed in the previous chapter, is constantly confronted with the futility of his actions. Every attempt to escape his conditions is met with an equally (or sometimes more) meaningless result. This impossibility of transcendence is not due to the author’s nihilism since, as it will be explained later, Palahniuk considers himself a romantic. Instead, meaninglessness is caused by the narrator’s inauthenticity and his reliance on superficial solutions that distract him from the psychological roots of his malaise. In other words, as Steven Gold points out, “...one inauthentic and empty lifestyle is replaced with another even more false and pointless one” (31). More importantly, the

narrator did not operate from a conscious position. His sleep-deprivation paired with a seclusion that shields him from other people's opinions, allowed him to construct a life based on a rage-driven imagination. Hallucinations and fantasy governed his life. At this point, it is important to note that some critics believed that the whole narrative unfolds only within the narrator's mind. James Giles, for instance, points out the irrationality of certain events like seeing beaten-up former fight club members in meetings. He writes: "these images of badly mutilated young men at business conferences constitute an early clue of the fundamental unreality of fight club" (36). He also considers the Paper Street house that the narrator moved to after the destruction of his apartment nothing more than a projection of his imagination, similar to Tyler himself, "Tyler's origin in the narrator's subconscious and the series of surreal events that unfold in his house would seem to indicate that the Paper Street setting exists strictly on the level of fantasy" (39). Although his new house was often visited by Marla, who is his only grip on truth, one can clearly see the blurred lines between reality and fantasy. There are also lucid moments that refute the idea that the whole plot is one extended hallucination. What is certain is that the technique of merging dreams and reality intensifies the narrator's detachment and alienation, and foreshadows the disastrous outcome where all irrational solutions deteriorate into madness.

By the end of the novel, the narrator experiences a semi-awakening provoked by the death of Bob. With the shooting of his former "comfort figure", death becomes a reality instead of a glorified fantasy. Simply put, "Bob's corpse, lying before the Narrator bloody and unquestionably dead, is an intrusion of the real" (Kennet 59).

This awakens the narrator to the consequences of his actions and reveals that his true intent was to distract himself from his problems rather than facing them. He remarks: “A man is dead, I say. This game is over. It’s not for fun anymore” (Palahniuk 178). The idea that it was all “for fun” betrays the inauthenticity of his ideas and the cowardice he displayed towards the pursuit of Tyler’s ideals. Yet, instead of returning to the roots of the problem and attempting to resolve the issues that gave birth to his destructive alter-ego, he continues to follow the same pattern. Eventually, the narrator’s anger towards life transforms into an anger towards Tyler. The final resolution blends destruction and self-destruction in a failed suicide attempt that neither solves his issue nor eliminates that ghost of Tyler that still exerted his influence on other men. In many ways, the ending summarizes the novel’s major theme. It portrays the meaningless and unsatisfactory results of the nihilistic rejection of life that prompts an active destruction of a guilt-inducing past. Brian Hartt observes:

The most significant event that brings home the nihilistic attitude of *Fight Club* and shows the hopelessness of the fractured self is the death of Tyler Durden [...] The roof does not explode. Everyone is not blasted free from history. Tyler fails, and with him, heroic masculinity fails. Trash has no use-value, heroic masculinity is just trash. Men are forced to confront the paradox that defines their very existence as subjects. (06)

The narrator is sent to an insane asylum where he continues to exhibit signs of neurosis such as describing his new setting as heaven and meeting people who refer to

him as Tyler. He also maintains a more sober form of nihilism that based his views on a feeling of indifference rather than self-loathing. His conclusion is “we are not special. We are not crap or trash, either. We just are. We just are, and what happens just happens” (Palahniuk 207).

3.6. Marla Singer and the Possibility of Salvation Through Human Connection

It is easy to read the main character’s existential loop as the author’s cynicism towards the possibility of meaning in postmodern culture. However, Chuck Palahniuk condemns, or at least satirizes the narrator’s nihilistic attitude rather than advocates it. In an interview that changes the way his novels should be treated, he declared: “I’m not a nihilist. I’m a romantic. All of my books are basically romances; they’re stories about reconnecting with community” (qtd. in Kavadlo 05). This statement imposes a different reading of *Fight Club*, beyond mere rejection of life and banalization of violence. It suggests that, somewhere between episodes of anger and schizophrenia, there exists a glimpse of hope and deliverance. The alternative solution, hidden in plain sight, as formulated by the author, is human connection. This cure, though never embraced by the narrator, reveals itself throughout the novel. Made apparent by the narrator’s seclusion, the comfort he finds in support groups and his need for a community of like-minded men, human connection and belonging are feelings that he constantly seeks subconsciously but never admits. This need, as well as his reluctance to accept it, is personified by one of the most important characters in the narrator’s life, namely Marla Singer.

In the opening chapter of the novel, the narrator makes an interesting remark. He says: "I know all of this: the gun, the anarchy, the explosion is really about Marla Singer" (Palahniuk 14). This statement can be understood in two ways. First, it could indicate that, since the narrator's comfort in support groups was interrupted by Marla's appearance, she was responsible for Tyler's creation and the chaos that ensued. On the other hand, it could also mean that his conflicting feeling towards her and his sentiment of unattainable love built up his frustrations to a boiling point; an idea that is supported by the fact that the explosion stopped and Tyler disappeared when they declared their "liking" (they were both afraid of employing the word love) to each other. Both cases are plausible and they indicate that "The protagonist's relationship with Marla is the most important actual one..." (Vickroy 71). As illustrated in many instances, the narrator's cowardice and past trauma prevent him from resolving his issues head on. He distracts himself with elaborate plans that emulate the feelings he seeks. The same is applicable to love that cannot be admitted because of his irrational views on masculinity, his self-loathing and the dysfunctional relationship of his parents. Laurie Vickroy explains: "He seeks refuge in media-driven images of masculinity that shun vulnerability and full humanity and mask why he has difficulty accepting Marla's love: she is like him, and he hates himself" (70). Indeed, Marla is both the narrator's feminine doppelgänger and his much-needed polar opposite.

Much like the narrator, Marla is presented as a damaged soul, suffering from self-hatred and acute nihilism. She frequents the same support groups in hope of "feeling alive" and soothing her anguish by witnessing real suffering and death (a

feeling she also sought by working in a funeral home). She also undergoes a failed suicide attempt. In fact, both the narrator and Marla's self-destructions were interrupted by the presence of the other. Marla's fascination with death stems from her views of herself. After she is saved by Tyler, she points her apartment to the paramedics who were looking for an overdose victim saying: "The girl is infectious human waste, and she's confused and afraid to commit to the wrong thing so she won't commit to anything" (Palahniuk 61). Not only does she express her self-loathing and her helplessness, she also reveals her loneliness and the need for genuine connection by adding: "The girl in 8G has no faith in herself," Marla shouts, "and she's worried that as she grows older, she'll have fewer and fewer options" (61). Here, the author establishes at an early stage that Marla functions as the feminine counterpart of the narrator. Even the protagonist's feminization is paralleled by Marla's masculine features such as her short hair, her smoking habits and the fact that "Marla can be a guy's name" (Palahniuk 89). What her overall description demonstrates is that she is a perfect match for the narrator, a kindred spirit that he refuses to notice. Steven Gold remarks: "they share a similar form of alienation and desperation; both are portrayed as being passively suicidal. They therefore have the potential to establish an intimate connection with each other on a very deep and genuine level" (20).

Beyond providing the connection the narrator needs, Marla's words also break his hallucinations and bring him back to reality. She is the one who woke him to his fakery in the support groups and the first one to call him Tyler, marking the beginning of the end of his dissociative personality disorder. From their very first encounter and

increasingly throughout the novel, “[s]he becomes his reality base and conscience, calling him on his inauthentic victimization, his hypocritical capitalism (selling expensive human fat soap), and eventually helps bring him to greater self-awareness” (Vickroy 72). In other words, Marla is the narrator’s link to reality. Her mere presence cures his hallucinations, as seen by Tyler disappearing whenever she enters. She breaks away the comfort he finds in fantasy and forces him to accept the truth about himself. That is why he pushes her away in an attempt to retain his illusions and distract himself from the roots of his issues. James Giles writes: “Despite his mixed feelings about her, Marla remains his anchor to reality and, fake devotee of terminal illness support groups though she is, his hope for ultimate psychological and sexual healing” (43). Although she is also attracted to self-destruction and often displays “a pure form of nihilism” (Mathews 90), Marla remains the only constructive power in the novel. She has the ability to free the narrator from the deep causes of his discomfort; his parental neglect that led to a life of seclusion, self-loathing and a perpetual search for a father figure that would restore meaning to his life. Chuck Palahniuk’s statement takes his full form when we know that ultimately, *Fight Club* is about a lonely man in desperate need for genuine connection.

Throughout the novel, the narrator seeks alternative ways to attain his relational needs. Tyler’s presence replaced fatherly guidance, secret orders conferred a sense of brotherhood, and even the controlled violence of fight clubs offered a feeling of belonging because “Fighting in the novel must be understood as a relational act” (Repphun 142). He nonetheless refuses to accept the vulnerability linked to such needs. Instead, he clings to conformity, resentment and the media-dictated

masculinity that only transformed his already developing nihilism into destructive rage against his own culture. This fixation on outside problems prevented him from “...engaging in the emotionally painful work of braving the deeper fears of one’s existence that cannot be confronted alone” (Vickroy 75). His blindness also resisted Marla’s love that had the potential of saving him from the chaos of his rebellious journey. Like many of Palahniuk’s novels, love (in both its filial and romantic sense) appears to be the answer. As Jesse Kavadlo notes, “Again and again, the supposedly espoused machismo, masochism, and nihilism must be traded hastily for something else, and that “something else” seems consistently to be love. Once Palahniuk’s narrators learn the truths about themselves, they turn to their book’s love interest for redemption” (20). While it is true that *Fight Club*’s protagonist’s acceptance of Marla’s love rids him of Tyler’s presence, it is unknown if his deeper psychological traumas are cured. Locked away in the mental asylum, he keeps displaying remnants of DID that suggest that love, though temporary freeing, is only one step towards salvaging his fragmented self.

3.7. Conclusion

Despite being understood by many readers as a reactionary criticism of modern culture, *Fight Club* is not a fictional self-help book that calls for rebellion. Instead, it is a philosophical journey into the psyche of a nihilistic character who lost touch with the traditional values that inject meaning to existence. The protagonist is overwhelmed with traumas that are caused both by his culture and by his own self-imposed limitations. His resentment and fantasies of total destruction are portrayed as

a wrong turn instead of an awakening. Tyler, the antihero with a messianic complex, is also broadly misunderstood. His presence is a hallucination, a projection of a distorted view of life made even more detached because of a prolonged period of insomnia. His proclamations are based on rejection and thus unable to be constructive. Tyler's "will to power" takes the route of historical dictators and cult leaders by forming groups vowed to destruction in which he reigns supreme while his subjects drown in conformity and self-sacrifice. Destructive nihilism is then the result of irrational dreams of vengeance against an alienating culture and a shortcut to obtain the unresolved emotional connections that would otherwise require a courageous confrontation with an undesirable self. Project Mayhem's aim of reducing civilization to ashes in the hope of building it anew fails to produce any lasting results and only exaggerates its members' psychological issues. Being imagined by a mind sculpted by conformity, corporate bureaucracy and alienation, the project ultimately reproduces the same patterns. As for the two opposing personalities sharing the narrator's body, they end up rejecting the presence of the other resulting in the literal attempt of self-destruction. Similar to all former nihilistic solutions, suicide proves to be as ineffective as Tyler's revolutionary lifestyle.

Palahniuk satirizes the rebellious impulses of his generation who associate happiness with the mediated images of epic narratives. The author also provides us with an alternative; that of human connection. Love, personified by Marla, is present yet neglected from the beginning of the novel. It imposes a painful awakening on the narrator rather than encouraging his illusions. It also demands a courageous introspection and an acceptance of the self with its flaws and traumas. Clearly, the

narrator's journey is dependent on his resentment against outside circumstances, a state that blinds him to his true needs. For this reason, it is only through accepting the vulnerability of recognizing his buried feelings that he broke free from his illusions and was able to begin the process of recovery that would heal him from self-destructive nihilism.

CHAPTER FOUR:

**Ethical Nihilism and the Failure of Individualistic “Will to
Power” in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road***

CHAPTER FOUR

Ethical Nihilism and the Failure of Individualistic “Will to Power” in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*

4.1. Introduction

Cormac McCarthy’s most notable novel after the border trilogy¹ is difficult to place within the same genre as the previous novels discussed in this thesis. Published a decade after *Fight Club*, *The Road* moves away from the crushing pressure of consumer culture and the incessant manipulation of mass media. It remains, however, a deeply existential work that focuses on the inherent nihilism that lies within individuals as opposed to the one imposed by a dysfunctional system. In many ways, *The Road* gives an answer, albeit bleak and unsatisfactory, to the revolutionary dreams of Tyler Durden. The scenario that Project Mayhem saw as the salvation of humanity is proven to be, in McCarthy’s world, no more than a potent ground to nurture humanity’s worst traits. Hope, though rare and wavering, does persist in *The Road*, and seems to be dependent on those neglected ideals such as family, love and sacrifice that are presented as the only antidotes to the uninterrupted disintegration of values, particularly morality, which is the focus of this work. However, *The Road* does not provide moralistic lessons, although many readers may see it as a religious

¹ Cormac McCarthy’s most popular series of novels: *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998). The name “border” trilogy comes from the fact that the three novels are set on the border between USA and Mexico.

parable. What it does is simply posit a thought experiment in which humanity is thrown into a world where all governing systems fail and in which brutality and violence become the new law of the land. In this postapocalyptic reality where even nature is impotent, McCarthy masterfully demonstrates, through his two forlorn characters, the struggle of maintaining a sense of moral goodness in the face of a general embracing of survivalist individualism that sees values as the impractical deadweight of a lost civilization.

Despite being considered a postapocalyptic novel, *The Road* goes beyond the tropes of the annihilation of the world and the post 9/11 fear of seeing the United States reduced to ashes. The novel borrows elements of the travel novel (resembling his former Western works), and the existential novel. Total destruction is only a pretext to test humanity's ability to maintain meaning when it is no longer needed. In other words, "...the tragic mode of the post-apocalyptic lends itself to existentialist questions about the meaning and purpose of human existence" (Joyce 13). For this reason, the causes of the apocalypse are never revealed in the novel, nor are they clearly stated in McCarthy's interviews. *The Road* cannot be used for political commentary cautioning against the dangers of the arms race, nor can it be recycled for the environmentalist discourse. The author did imagine a possible catalyst for the disaster but purposefully leaves it for our interpretation. Lydia Cooper clarifies: "The precipitating disaster is intentionally ambiguous in *The Road*, as McCarthy indicates in one interview published in Rolling Stone. He says that he loosely designed the effects on the natural world in the novel to reflect a meteor strike, but he left the possibility open for the causal event to be read as human-made—which is his own

best bet for the real world's fate" (143). What concerns the novel is the nature of humanity when it is shorn of the superficial civilization it had created. Humanity, as opposed to mere existence or survival, is tested through relationships since the "I" of the individual can only exist in contrast with the other. The question raised here is whether this "I" will thrive with or despite the other. In other words, will the natural response be communal cooperation or individualistic opposition. McCarthy's bleak worldview seems to veer towards the latter, while his protagonists (especially the boy) struggle to revive the former. In this chapter, this is translated as a nihilistic abandonment of civilizational values and a struggle to maintain ethical principles in interpersonal relationships. These themes will become more apparent after a brief summary of the plot.

The story follows the journey south of an unnamed father and son in a desolate land in which even the sun is veiled by the endless smoke and ash. The narrator constantly reminds us of the inviability of the world; forests burning, trees falling, an ashen earth hostile to all form of plant or animal life. Only humans stubbornly cling to survival by either scavenging the quickly-dwindling remnants of a fallen civilization, or turning against their kin, eating human flesh and herding the weak like cattle waiting for slaughter. The father, sensing the freezing winter approaching, decides to walk south towards the coast, using only a shopping cart as a makeshift vehicle to transport their supplies. The mother, appearing only in dreams or in the man's memory, gave birth to her son after the "apocalypse". She was unable to bear the coldness of the new world and resorted to end her suffering with an obsidian shard. The man, left alone to care for his son, took an oath to protect him from both the

ruthless nature, and the gangs of cannibals. Protection here, included the possibility of killing him himself to spare him from being captured, violated and eaten. This humane yet heart-wrenching decision haunts the man throughout the novel, unable to destroy what he sees as a divine being, but tortured to see him live in an increasingly cruel world. The man's illness that guaranteed his untimely death only added to his predicament.

The two characters, adamant in their refusal to eat human flesh or join what they call the "bad guys", spend the majority of their travel seeking food and shelter. However, it is their brief yet crucial encounters, and their search for other "good guys" that constitute the philosophical core of the novel. The boy's desire for a sense of community is evident in his out-of-place goodness, which leads him to constantly offer help and forgiveness. He derives his moral compass mostly from the heroic stories his father told him and his own innocent sense of justice. The boy keeps his father on a strict ethical code and sees in other survivors an opportunity to exert generosity and selflessness to the detriment of his own safety and survivability. The man, on the other hand, shows a sterner approach. He does not hesitate to kill a cannibal who took hold of his son, splattering his brains on the boy's hair. He also flees rather than helps the human cattle trapped in a basement. His righteous cruelty eventually creates a divide between him and his son when he punishes a thief by leaving him hungry and naked by the side of the road.

As they reached their destination, the man realized the futility of his goal. His illness also caught up on him leading to the end of the road. Before he dies, instead of killing his son as he had planned, the man chooses an irrational leap of faith. He

pressures the boy to carry on, believing that “goodness” would find him. Indeed, in a strange twist of fate that seems to contradict the rest of the narrative, other “good guys” appear three days later. An old veteran and his family, who seem to hold on to a similar ethical code (at least in their refusal to indulge in cannibalism), take on the boy. The novel ends in a nostalgic scene of the old world, suggesting that there is no turning back. The bitter sweet ending spilled much ink among critics who saw it as too optimistic. However, through the study presented in this chapter, it will be shown as fitting perfectly in McCarthy’s intersection between utter nihilism and hopeful humanism.

As seen earlier, the causes of the catastrophe did not matter. Similarly, the location of the narrative is irrelevant to the core themes. Some researchers tried to locate *The Road* based on the architecture but conceded that it should not concern the reader. For example, Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz writes: “The reader catches a few glimpses of buildings and landscapes that are somehow identifiable as the southeastern U.S., most likely the Tennessee-Georgia border, but, in general, what we see is a de-geographied America” (05). What we know is that the story unfolds in “What used to be called the states” (McCarthy 35), following an unnamed road to the coast. To locate the novel within a specific location would be to misread it because “in order to appreciate the true literary stature of *The Road* one should put aside all considerations related to historical and geographical spaces...” (Ibarrola-Armendariz 08). The structure of the novel is as mysterious. There are no chapters, and the whole work is composed of a series of short paragraphs. This method, however, is not a random stylistic touch but a technique that echoes the fragmented adventure it depicts.

John Cant explains: “This structure is clearly intended to reflect the nature of the journey that constitutes the action of the book. The journey itself is a piece, a series of short stages, entirely on foot, and comprising a continuous whole” (184). As a matter of fact, everything in the novel, from its structure to the map the protagonists rely on, to the language they use, is short and disjointed. As will be explained later, this reflects the decaying world in which everything progressively loses its meaning.

Loss of meaning, both in form and content, is at the center of the novel, although this latter cannot be fully considered a nihilistic work. Beside the gothic elements of death and decay present in all McCarthy’s work, *The Road* focuses on the fragile meaning of humanity and its struggle to retain the civilizational values that separates it from other living creatures. It wavers between a complete hopelessness that explores “the fear that human beings may not in fact deserve to survive” (Cooper 221), and an optimistic yet prudent faith “in individual’s ability to experience a transcendent, and perhaps ultimately redemptive, empathic connection with others” (234). It is the tension between these two forces that motivates this chapter, which attempts to demonstrate the destructive cost of nihilistic individualism, and the redemptive power of ethical altruism in a world of decaying morality.

4.2. Vestiges of a Failed Civilization: The Nihilistic Cosmos of *The Road*

4.2.1. The Unsustainability of Civilization

While the two former novels discussed in this thesis deal directly with the effects of capitalism and consumerism on the individual’s loss of solid conceptional

foundations of the world, *The Road* places its characters outside the restrictions of civilization. It does not, however, completely overlook the self-destructive nature of American society. Similar to DeLillo and Palahniuk, McCarthy is aware of the violence inherent in the capitalistic “will to power” and the American “will to conquer”. Many critics consider *The Road* as a response to the 9/11 attacks that revealed both the fragility of the formerly untouchable United States, and the “evils” of its foreign policy that ended the myth of American moral superiority. For instance, Lydia Cooper notes: “The apocalypticism of *The Road* seems to be a response to an immediate and visceral fear of cataclysmic doom in the United States after the terrorist attacks on 9/11” (221). Beyond the fear of destruction, McCarthy also exposes the end of what Jon Cant called in the title of his 2008 book *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*. In the nihilistic cosmos of *The Road*, McCarthy shows his pessimism in the American ability to sustain itself or provide its inhabitants with strong values to retain their humanity. In this regard, the puritans’ “promised land” is no different than any other war-ridden, shortages-plagued country. This further proves that the novel is ultimately about human experience regardless of its geographical location. Susan Kollin writes: “In McCarthy’s novel, the United States is no longer an outlier, a national model to uphold or an exceptional player in the history of nations. Instead, the author places the country in human history as a nation playing out a familiar story in a long line of civilizations that have come and gone” (166).

The Road focuses on human experience but it remains a postapocalyptic tale. Although it does not reveal the causes of the cataclysm, its pages are rife with depictions of ruins of a lost civilization. The large and various buildings that once

constituted the apex of progress fall into both decay and meaninglessness, and they fail to provide the most basic needs for survival such as food or safe shelter. Randal Wilhelm explains: “everywhere in McCarthy’s novel we find the detritus of a broken civilization—abandoned gas stations and homes, burned out shells of buildings and cities, rolls of metal roofing, barrels of tools, jack-knifed tractor trailers and even a sylvan locomotive—but little to no food with which to sustain life” (131). The uselessness of infrastructure is paralleled with the uselessness of objects. Things formerly deemed essential are casually discarded by the side of the road, as survival dictates a devaluation of everything that does not contribute directly to sustaining life. The protagonists come across “Odd things scattered by the side of the road. Electrical appliances, furniture. Tools. Things abandoned long ago by pilgrims enroute to their several and collective deaths” (McCarthy 164). There is a call towards the void that engulfs everything in *The Road*, from the dying nature to the decaying buildings to the extinction of life. With it, comes a natural meaninglessness beyond mere existential futility. Since the end is inevitable, less and less things succeed to retain their worth, leading to “The continual impoverishment of reality” (Walsh 228). The destruction of the material world is the most obvious manifestation of the deterioration of meaning. It is the first apparent result of the apocalypse but also an indicator of another, deeper devaluation that will result from living in a fragmented and undistinguishable reality. Even the map the protagonists rely on is progressively falling apart: “The tattered oil company roadmap had once been taped together but now it was just sorted into leaves and numbered with crayon in the corners for their

assembly” (McCarthy 34). It is fragmented, devoid of city names and eventually fails to fulfill its promise of leading them to a safe place.

The absence of names in the novel is itself an indication of an ever-shrinking sphere of meaning. It is not only places that fall into oblivion but also animals (almost entirely extinct), forgotten tastes and useless objects. Language had to adapt to the urgency of survival and stripped itself of everything that is not immediate or essential. The protagonist reflects on this impoverishment of language saying: “The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought” (McCarthy 71). Dialogues also take up the direct and concise nature of postapocalyptic existence. Few words are exchanged between the characters, always in short sentences, straight to the point. Language, like the civilization in which it thrived, becomes a vestige of its past glory, now falling into decay and retaining only its useful foundation. Susan Kollin notes: “The language of *The Road* is incantatory in its repetitions and fragmentations, like an ancient text exhumed from the desert in bits and pieces, as if the narrative itself did not quite survive the catastrophe in full form” (166). With this, McCarthy paints a full picture of both material and conceptual desolation. The few things that survive testify of the old world’s failure to sustain itself.

4.2.2. The Death (and Rebirth) of Consumerism

When all signs of civilization fall apart, consumerism stands out as both a testimony of its failure and an indication of its roots in human nature. The primitive rituals of unrestrained consumption still survive in *The Road*, made apparent by the hoarding of goods, slavery and above all, cannibalism. At the same time, symbols of consumer culture such as supermarkets were the first to fall, losing their essential quality of being places of overabundance. In both cases, consumerism is depicted as a destructive force that pushes humanity to devour itself, both figuratively and literally. Nari Jung writes: “The prevalence of cannibalism, shopping carts, and supermarkets, and the appearance of cans of Coca-Cola are evidence that the novel is a critique of capitalist consumer culture” (96). This critique, however, remains covert and more indicative of humanity’s destructive gluttony than of a political system. For instance, the plethora of discarded objects that litter the landscape stand as “a reminder of the excess and waste that marks daily life for many Americans” (Kollin 160). The idea of uncalculated excess is confirmed by McCarthy himself who viewed this novel as an opportunity for readers to learn contentment. Steven Frye explains: “When asked what he wanted readers to take away from the novel, his response was precise yet paradoxical: “That we should be grateful.”” (Frye, 2009: 165). Gratefulness, however, was never humanity’s forte and *The Road* is not an overtly moralistic tale. Consumerism still haunts the pages of the novel in both its ruined capitalistic form and its renewed cannibalistic nature.

The remnants of consumer culture are not merely decaying in *The Road*; their very meaning is reversed. Their significance is recuperated and used to symbolize the

opposite of what they once stood for. The shopping cart for instance is commonly seen as a symbol of abundance, used to carry an excessive quantity of goods. In the novel, it reminds us of the scarcity of resources since it contains the entirety of the protagonists' belongings. It is loaded with whatever they can scavenge, and quickly empties even after they fill it to the brim with the food that they found in the fallout shelter. Randall Wilhem clarifies: "The shopping cart, one of their most treasured material helpers, is also both physical and symbolic container. Its core function in the once prosperous society by which it was created was to carry groceries in abundance, foodstuffs of such quantity one literally had to cart them away" (132). The shopping cart's reversal of meaning is not confined to the apocalypse for even today, it serves to highlight the ruthlessness of consumerism. While it is usually used to hoard goods, it is also salvaged by the homeless to carry their scarce worldly possessions. In many ways, the protagonists of the novel resemble homeless itinerants with their rusty shopping cart with its "wonky" front wheel, carrying canned food and a piece of tarp that serves as their only protection from the rain.

As another symbol of consumer culture, billboards are used to create a similarly subversive meaning. Traditionally, they are the sirens of the capitalist world, enticing consumers to buy more and attaching the promise of happiness to products and brands. In *The Road*, the luring messages are erased, faded away and painted over. Instead, they contain threats and warnings that repel people instead of calling upon them: "They passed through towns that warned people away with messages scrawled on the billboards. The billboards had been whited out with thin coats of paint in order to write on them and through the paint could be seen a pale palimpsest

of advertisements for goods which no longer existed” (McCarthy 101). As the products faded from the world, so did the language that used to be dedicated to them. The billboards are re-claimed to serve the mood of the era, that of hostility and mistrust where the mindless pleasures of consumerism are nothing but a distant memory of a lost reality. As Susan Kollin notes, “In this new landscape billboards no longer beckon consumers with enticing promises about their product. Instead, they repel and rebuke the viewer, offering only fading signs of a lost world” (162).

There are a few instances in which consumerist symbols create a sense of nostalgia in the novel. Regular objects taken for granted today are imbued with a certain mystique like the brass sextant that the protagonist admired and placed carefully back into its case, or more significantly, the can of *Coca Cola* that was offered to the boy in a semi-religious manner. *Coca Cola* is the only brand in the novel, and one that is internationally recognized adding to the universality of the work. The man, ecstatic about his find presents the can to his son, eager to see his reaction to the bubbly and sweet drink: “He slipped the boy’s knapsack straps loose and set the pack on the floor behind him and he put his thumbnail under the aluminum clip on the top of the can and opened it. He leaned his nose to the slight fizz coming from the can and then handed it to the boy” (McCarthy 19). The boy was mesmerized by this new beverage, “It’s really good, he said” (19) and offered his father a sip. The two sat solemnly, engrossed in a brief moment of bliss that resembled a ritual. The beauty of the moment is shaped by its rarity. The boy himself knows that his father wanted him to drink it by himself because “[he] won’t ever get to drink another one” (19). The *Coca Cola* can, being one of the last remaining in the world, returns us to

the idea of the impoverishment of reality, signaling that the soft drink is, like many other symbols of consumerism, a vestige of a broken civilization.

4.3. The Meaninglessness of Survival in an Indifferent Universe

4.3.1. The Futility of Survival

The continual destruction of the physical world and the decline of meaning are the foundations of McCarthy's nihilistic cosmos. The prevalence of ruins of a lost civilization proved the unsustainability of the capitalist world, and the uselessness of buildings, gas stations and discarded objects drained existence of its value and reduced it to mere survivalism. As more and more elements of the world vanish, even language lost its complexity. In *The Road*, the "beam of light" that brought about the apocalypse created "a realm in which global annihilation precipitates the obliteration of meaning" (Gwinner 143).

It is in this environment of complete hopelessness that the protagonists attempt to make sense out of their doomed existence. The challenge is not merely to survive but to find a reason to. A life of perpetual suffering that inevitably ends in tragedy is hardly worth the effort of sustaining it, and many characters opted for the easy way out. The wife's decision to end her life might seem as a cowardly approach but her arguments, as will be seen later, are sounder than her husband's. Ely, an old man travelling alone and awaiting his death also understood the world as it was; a meaningless delay of the inevitable fall into collective oblivion. Despite this apparent hopelessness, the man and the boy strived to locate a glimmer of meaning, and

continually fluctuated between utter despair and transcendental hope. Their struggle is where the existential dimension of the novel comes into play, and the nuances that prevents it from being a completely nihilistic work. This must not be understood as an indicator that *The Road* is a moralistic tale about the redeeming power of faith. The novel remains a deeply pessimistic work, and as Dana Phillips notes, “to read *The Road* for signs of hope and redemption is to misread it, and worse: it is to miss the boat not by an hour or a day, but by an epoch or even an era” (188). The novel treats life as an indifferent force that highlights the insignificance of human existence and propels everything into an inevitable void.

It is important to mention that, unlike the two other novels discussed in this thesis, *The Road* shows nihilism as stemming from the world itself, not from characters who failed to justify their existence. In both *White Noise* and *Fight Club* (as well as in McCarthy’s previous novels) the world was still rife with sources of meaning (career, family, love...) and, despite the fear of death that loomed over their characters, survival was not a dire need. In those novels, the lack of spirituality, the dysfunctional family structure and the influence of media are only catalysts that precipitated the characters’ rejection of meaning. In *The Road*, however, “it is the world itself that seems to confirm an ever-present, pervasive nihilism...” (Moon 49). The earth refuses to produce crops, the sun is always covered by the constant thick smoke, and the prevalence of corpses highlights the insignificance of human life. John Cant writes: “The sense of man’s insignificance in a godless universe, one of McCarthy’s constant themes, is powerfully conveyed here” (185). It is these reasons that make the protagonists’ search for meaning particularly difficult.

Finding a reason to live is a central preoccupation in the novel, and for this reason, the protagonist, simply referred to as the man, crafts himself a divinely-ordained mission of protecting his son. His role was to shield him from both physical harm and the moral perversion of cannibalism. This purpose might seem as the natural instinct of a parent but in *The Road*, family structure had not survived the fall. The mother, for instance, decided to abandon her son after he was born. More dramatically, the charred human infant found roasting on a spit suggest that families were prepared to devour their own progeny in order to avoid starvation. The protagonist himself, although for more humane reasons, wrestles with the idea of killing his son. Consequently, it is not a completely rational decision to strive to maintain someone's life knowing the inescapability of tragedy. The man is then forced to inject a spiritual dimension to his aim. He tells the boy: "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God" (McCarthy 61). This assertion feels misplaced in McCarthy's vision of the world where God is absent or indifferent to the suffering of his creation. Yet, the father's survival depends on an irrationality that echoes (and reverses) the biblical parable of Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac because "The father's faith, like Abraham's, is founded on absurdity in that what God is asking them to do defies logic" (Moon 56). The protagonist is aware of the absurdity of his claims and often reveals his uncertainty through unanswered prayers that betray the fragility of his faith.

Another realization that destroys the father's claim is that, behind the dreams of divine purpose, his desire to protect his son is in fact a way to guarantee his own survival. What is apparent from the beginning of the novel is that, without the boy, the

father would have been consumed by nihilism, and most probably, would have joined his wife in eternal slumber. This fact was prophesied by his wife who said “The one thing I can tell you is that you won’t survive for yourself” (McCarthy 46). Indeed, the boy quickly became the man’s warranty to remain among the living. Euan Gallivan writes: “The father sees himself in the child, and in the affirmation of the child’s will-to-live sees the extension of his own beyond death” (102). In other words, as the narrator explains, “the boy was all that stood between him and death” (McCarthy 24). This justification is even more absurd than the first since the man’s worsening health, translated by his bloody coughs, predicted his untimely death and eventually left the boy to fend for himself. The emptiness of the man’s reasoning reveals the impossibility of finding sustainable meaning in *The Road* and “...as happens with the Camusian absurd man, they do not manage to find any definite answer to their existential doubts and until the very end of the story they show symptoms of being lost in life and structurally traumatized” (Laguarta Bueno 84).

The man’s practical methods of attaining his goals are also short-sighted and doomed to failure. The primary motive that puts the two protagonists on the road is the idea that heading south towards the coast would increase their chances of survival, or at least spare them the cold days brought by the impending winter. The man knew that there was no salvation awaiting them there. The plan was more akin to a distraction than an actual solution, and his awareness of it exacerbated his sense of uselessness. Early in the novel, the narrator foreshadows the futility of their journey, “He said that everything depended on reaching the coast, yet waking in the night he knew that all of this was empty and no substance to it” (McCarthy 24). Eventually,

when the two do reach the coast, they are confronted with the uniformity of the world's desolation. It was still cold (causing the boy to fall ill), and since its color is the reflection of the sky, the sea met them in grey attire instead of the blue that the boy had wished to see. Evil had also followed them south since they found themselves chasing a thief who had snatched their cart with all their belongings. Finally, the journey ended with the death of the father signaling the end of his irrational dreams of finding a safe haven. Both their search and its failure proved the futility of their actions and the meaninglessness of survival. Susan Kollin states:

Even though they are in search of a better place, the father and son do not arrive at a new Eden, as the contemporary American road novel often promises. Instead, they are stuck with a fallen world that appears beyond redemption. There is no certainty of a return to a paradise or any assurance that they can remake life to resemble how it once was.
(162)

At this point, the sense of complete hopelessness created by McCarthy had been established. However, it is crucial to understand the forces that prevented the protagonists from finding sustainable meaning. The first is a recurrent theme present in all existential fiction and discussed in the previous chapters; that of the fear of death. Death looms over all individuals reminding them of the brevity of existence and its inevitable fall towards oblivion. In *The Road*, death is ever present, filling the barren landscape. Corpses, harvested for their flesh, newly starved or "dried to leather", are a common spectacle for the inhabitants of *The Road*. Moreover, the threat of starvation and the roaming cannibalistic gangs force the man and the boy to

become closely acquainted with death, unlike the characters of the previous novels who merely reflected on their impending yet distant doom without an immediate threat to their safety. Whether tangible or conceptual, death, devoid of a spiritual dimension that transcends it, always dilutes meaning and accentuates man's "smallness" in the universe. John Cant writes: "The ultimate challenge of cosmic insignificance arises in the contemplation of death" (186). The characters of *The Road* contemplate it too often since the majority of their action is spent discussing it, avoiding it or witnessing it. Jordan Dominy clarifies: "The man and his son talk frequently about starving, dying, or being close to death. Moreover, the narrator consistently describes the landscape as dead, with essentially no fauna or flora extant" (150). As a matter of fact, about half of their dialogues are concerned with death. As discussed by Lydia Cooper, this fear inhabits roughly fourteen out of their thirty dialogues (230). The wife described death a lover that her "whorish heart" was seduced by, and the man often sees it beckoning in his dreams. With all these manifestations, it is impossible for the protagonists to escape it or overlook it.

Death, as understood by many characters, can also take the form of a liberator. When it has robbed life of its meaning, it stands as the only solution to transcend useless suffering. Under this worldview, killing is sparing and sparing is condemning to perpetual agony. For this reason, one of the inner conflicts torturing the man is the idea of freeing his son from the burden of life. This option had been discussed between the man and his wife before she committed suicide. She said: "I'd take him with me if it weren't for you. You know I would. It's the right thing to do" (McCarthy 45). Even in the man's mind, it often comes out as "the right thing to do" because he

feels that it is unethical to prolong the child's suffering and to continually expose him to the horrors of a world without future. At the beginning of the novel, we are introduced to a revolver that becomes a trusty companion that generates much anxiety when lost. The gun holds a particular significance for the man. It is a symbol of both protection and self-destruction. While it is used to repel the "bad guys", the man had carefully left two bullets for him and his son as their ticket out of existence. When he shoots a "road rat" that takes hold of the boy, however, only one bullet is left. At this point, the revolver's function as protector becomes only symbolic since the man fills it with fake bullets to intimidate aggressors, while the real one is reserved for the boy. This fact terrifies the man who stubbornly refuses to accept reality: "A single round left in the revolver. You will not face the truth. You will not" (McCarthy 55). The man even contemplates a possible malfunction of the gun that would force him to crush his son's skull with a rock. Yet, in all cases, the man shows a persistent faith in the boy's survival, and holds on to his refusal to view death as a liberator. He reflects: "Can you do it? When the time comes? When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time. Curse God and die. What if it doesn't fire? It has to fire. What if it doesn't fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock?" (91). This reluctance to "free" his son might appear as cowardice but it reveals his belief, though misplaced, in the value of life and the boy's possibility of finding meaning. It is a leap of faith that contrasts with the general "godlessness" of his universe. It also shows that only a spiritual act of faith can dispel the nihilism of existence. However, transcendence is almost impossible to maintain in *The Road*, constantly refuted by both the universe and the characters they encounter.

4.3.2. Spirituality as a Neglected Prerequisite to Hope

The belief in a spiritual world that transcends the physical is a strong antidote to nihilism. Religion, mainly Christianity which shaped both the author and his characters, weakens the fear of death and views it as only a transitory stage of existence. It also considers individuals as immortal souls that pass on and retain a divine quality that surpasses their fleshly vessels. These concepts give sense to suffering and solace to loss. In simpler terms, religion has the potential of dispelling the crisis of meaninglessness. The world of *The Road*, however, seems devoid of this spiritual quality. Early in the novel, the very land is described as “Barren, silent, godless” (McCarthy 05). There are many religious allusions in the novel but the world itself seems atheistic. As seen earlier, the world is indifferent, hopelessness is pandemic, and most characters have abandoned looking up for answers. As Stephen Joyce explains, “Although Christian themes run throughout the text, there is no affirmation that there is a God to whom one can appeal” (09). In fact, the man constantly speaks to God but he is often met with a silence that shakes his faith: “Then he just knelt in the ashes. He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last?” (McCarthy 11). The man’s plea does not entirely dissipate his faith; he simply channeled his need for spirituality into a veneration of his son. However, the world he inhabits constantly negates his obstinate devotion, and presents divine intervention as a mere illusion.

As seen in the previous novels, any form of faith that transcends physical existence is essential to maintaining a sense of hope. The general tendency to overlook religion, from Nietzscheanism to postmodernism, contributed to the

widespread of nihilism. In *The Road*, however, there is no definite stance towards the issue. The man's obstinance in believing in "goodness" suggests a bias towards the value of faith, while the postapocalyptic landscape implies its uselessness. This paradox emphasizes the novel's philosophical nature. What it certain is that "...the novel invites a number of questions: Are not human conceptions of the divine mere illusions? Doesn't the destructive and avaricious potential of the human race make plain the absence of a beneficent and active divinity?" (Frye 173). These questions can be answered in the affirmative if we, like the boy's mother, look at the world in a pragmatic yet superficial manner. This vision of divine absence is best articulated by one of the most mysterious characters in the novel; Ely.

Along the road, the two protagonists came across a disheveled old man travelling alone. At first glance, though clearly apprehensive of their presence, he seemed to match their description of "good guys". He was the first person they met in a long time who did not try to kill or rob them. Although this was mainly due to his weakness since he was "small and bent", and smelled terribly bad "even by the new world standards" (McCarthy 130). What it meant for the boy who longed for a sense of community, was a rekindling of his hope of finding other "good" people. He pressed his father to offer him food and ended up inviting him to share their dinner and coffee. Despite resisting the idea that contradicted his survival instincts, the man yielded to his son's demands and tolerated Ely's presence on the condition that they would part ways in the morning. Ely, despite being harmless, proved to be different from what they thought. First, his whole identity seems to be a lie. Neither the name nor the age he gave them was true. Second, he refuses to thank the boy saying that he

would not have done the same were the roles reversed. Most importantly, Ely claimed to have predicted the advent of the end of the world. Though cryptic in his statements, he says: "I knew this was coming [...] People were always getting ready for tomorrow. I didn't believe in that. Tomorrow wasn't getting ready for them. It didn't even know they were there" (McCarthy 137). His alleged predictions were not religious for he clearly stated his denial of God. In his mind, both the future and people's efforts to plan it are meaningless. If he were a prophet, he would be one who preaches utter hopelessness. As Patrick O'Connor writes, "Ely is the anti-prophet that is apt for the dying universe in which the characters reside. Ely revels in absolute nihilism" (10).

The man engages in a discussion with Ely that nearly shook his faith. When mentioning God, the old man replies with "There is no God and we are his prophets" (McCarthy 138). This statement that vaguely sounds like an inversion of the Islamic proclamation of faith² is very significant to his thought. Not only does it deny the existence of God, but it also suggests that humanity, with both its insignificance and its rewarded cruelty, serves as a living testimony to atheism. The desolate earth also confirmed his statement because "where men can't live gods fare no better" (141). This too might be read in a dual sense because Man, preoccupied with survival, has no room for the transcendental. The solution for the faith-deprived individual is to welcome the ultimate nothingness with open arms, "Things will be better when everybody's gone" (141). These passages expose the emptiness of existence when it is

² The Islamic proclamation of faith can be roughly translated as "There is one God and Muhammed is his prophet". Although Ely's ideas refute all religions, the phrase he uses evokes the Islamic way of formulating belief as opposed to the man who sticks to the Christian conception of "God in the flesh" that prompts him to view his son as a Christ figure.

too attached to the physical realm, and the logical fate of living through suffering without a divine presence to alleviate it. This discussion shows that “The old man is bereft of faith and craves his own death, encouraging the man to join him in his passive hope for oblivion” (Frye 176). Ely’s wishes are passive because although he dreams of death, he lacks the courage that the man’s wife had. He predicts a future where all life would fade, forcing death itself to accept its own uselessness. He says: “When we’re all gone at last then there’ll be nobody here but death and his days will be numbered too. He’ll be out in the road there with nothing to do and nobody to do it to. He’ll say: Where did everybody go? And that’s how it will be” (McCarthy 141). Naturally, these claims can be translated as the ramblings of a deranged old man fallen victim to his fears. Indeed, many critics refuse to view Ely as a prophet and equate him to the many talkative and speculative men that inhabit the American south. Dana Phillips writes:

Some readers take Ely to be a figure of the prophet Elijah, and thus part of the thread of biblical allusion McCarthy has woven into his text. But interpretation of *The Road* as allusive fails to consider its setting: in the south, biblical names are still common, and all one needs to do in order to hear open-ended speculation about the end of the world like Ely’s (“this or something like it”) is visit a grocery store, take a seat on a neighbor’s porch, or listen to AM radio. (180)

Whether a prophet of the apocalypse or a fabulating fool, Ely’s words weighed the protagonist down and confirmed the claim that a faithless soul often breeds nihilism.

The encounter with Ely and the protagonist's refusal to abandon faith constitute a common theme in McCarthy's writings. They betray his covert claim that spirituality is crucial for maintaining hope. In *The Road*, this is shown by the two openly atheistic characters of Ely and the man's wife. This pattern reveals that "McCarthy's nonbelievers (in these later works) are despairing and suicidal. Though the novel takes no absolute position on the existence of God and the role of the divine, it expresses with some force the value of belief as an essential ingredient of hope..." (Frye 175). These arguments are not meant to prove the veracity of religious beliefs. They merely demonstrate that any concept that transcends the limitations of life can serve as an antidote to hopelessness. Religion, for instance, gives meaning to suffering (even if based on fantasies), while its absence reduces existence to a succession of tragedies that end with death. It is then logical for "non-believers" (whatever that belief might be) would opt for a shortcut to end their pointless agony. On the other hand, the man and the boy do not only have a reason to survive but also, by connecting their sense of the divine to the sacredness of their father/son relationship, maintain a sense of community. Traditional values of love and family that the heroes preserve are also able to dispel the ghost of nihilism. However, similar to all other remnants of civilization, they are slowly disintegrating in a cosmos where humans are guided by their reptilian brain, forced to eat their own progeny for sustenance.

4.4. “Men among Wolves”: The Fall of Community and Humanity

4.4.1. The Hunter/Prey Paradigm and the Dehumanization of the “Other”

It is difficult to maintain meaningful relationships when one’s own sense of identity is lost. The characters of *The Road* are so engrossed in survival that they fail to identify as anything beyond living creatures clinging to life. When asked about the identity of a man who sat half-burned by the side of the road, the father replied: “I don’t know. Who is anybody?” (McCarthy 39). This answer, in addition to the fact that all characters are unnamed (apart from Ely who lies about his name), presents the inhabitants of *The Road* as devoid of individuality. They are simply another component of the flora and fauna that falls uniformly into the void of a dying world. As a matter of fact, the characters of the novel are described, both by themselves and by the narrator, as resembling animals more than human beings. Consequently, the prevailing relationships are not those of a civilized society but abide by the laws of the survival of the fittest which turns them into either hunters or hunted. Euan Gallivan writes: “Just as the father likens himself and his son to two hunted animals, so others are likened to the animals that hunt, bestial in their savagery, as is necessitated by their environment” (99). For instance, the man’s eyes that sunk from his emaciated face are described as follows: “Eyes collared in cups of grime and deeply sunk. Like an animal inside a skull looking out the eyeholes” (McCarthy 51). Besides showing his apparent starvation, this description betrays his vulnerability, likening him to a small animal, hiding behind his humanoid façade. In contrast, the cannibal that attacked them is described as a menacing monster: “The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with

human flesh” (60). The focus on the cold eyes and the teeth that are accustomed to human taste puts the stranger into a predatorial position, looming over the innocent creatures that only sting back to repel the attacker. This dynamic is what pushes the boy to divide the world into “good guys” and “bad guys”, and forces the man to remain suspicious of all strangers, preventing him from building any new relationships.

The dehumanizing nature of the hunter/prey dynamics is further illustrated by the practice of owning the weak as human livestock. Slavery, throughout history, had always been a brutal institution that dehumanized both the slave and the owner, and McCarthy’s southern roots undoubtedly influenced his understanding of the matter. In *The Road*, however, slaves are not kept only for labor, but also for harvesting their flesh. They are herded like cattle in large convoys that the protagonists watch from afar: “Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites ill-clothed against the cold and fitted in dog collars and yoked each to each” (McCarthy 73). The list blurs the line between people and “goods of war” making the two elements indistinguishable from each other. Also, the pregnant women suggest the end of the family structure since births are the result of the forceful fulfillment of carnal desire that only increases the quantity of the herd. Later in the novel, the protagonists come across an even more disturbing spectacle. While searching for supplies in the basement of a seemingly abandoned house, they encounter a group of people that serve as a food reserve. The missing leg of one of them suggests that their limbs are cut off one at a time to keep

the “freshness” of the meat: “Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous” (McCarthy 88). Appalled by the horrific scene, the man fled without attempting to help them lest he is caught by their captors. Similar to the convoy, the “owned” people also suggest a symbolism of slavery, especially if we consider the author’s origin and the setting of the novel. Jordan Dominy explains: “The scene evokes earlier portrayals of cannibalism; the resemblance of the house to a plantation estate harkens to the antebellum South, where chattel slavery persisted through the middle of the nineteenth century even after it had been banned in the British Empire, where its detractors likened it to cannibalism” (152).

Slavery in *The Road* is irrespective of race (since all elements of identity have vanished). It is applied to anyone who is weak enough to fall into the “prey” category. The fate of the victims aggravates the dehumanizing nature of cannibalism. While they are likened to animals at first, they eventually turn into nothing more than waste. The remains are discarded in bulk to rot away in the absent sun. After shooting one of the road rats, the protagonist returns to retrieve his lost belongings only to find that the cannibal he killed had in turn become food. The narrator describes the aftermath of the massacre: “Coming back he found the bones and the skin piled together with rocks over them. A pool of guts. He pushed at the bones with the toe of his shoe. They looked to have been boiled. No pieces of clothing” (McCarthy 57). Similar to the empty cans and the unusable objects that litter the landscape, “The destiny of the consumed thing is to become waste” (Dominy 152). In this environment where

individuals are either monsters or human-trash, it is almost impossible to maintain one's humanity, let alone attempt to build meaningful relationships. Communities do exist but they contribute to the decline, not the retrieval of meaning. In many cases, finding objects that guarantee one's survival becomes more desirable and more valuable than connecting with people.

When people are turned into commodities, used for sustenance and discarded when their value is depleted, it is only natural that certain objects take a higher rank in the survivalist hierarchy. The primitive man is both hunter and gatherer as seen in the man and the boy's constant search for useful things (gas, blankets, binoculars...) to fill their cart. For the man's pragmatic mind, connections with those objects replace the need for human interaction because while the first prolongs survival, the second only threatens it. Randall Wilhelm explains: "Objects become, then, intimately connected with the protagonists' very existence, some even to the point where they become psychologically embodied, and when they are lost or left behind, engender in the mind anxiety and something akin to the human sense of loss" (131-132). This sense of loss is best illustrated in one of the last interactions the man had with a stranger. As they returned to their camp from a walk along the beach, the protagonists discover that their cart, along with their blankets, food and tarp, was all gone. The sense of loss here is worse than parting with a human being because they viewed the sudden exposure to cold and hunger as a potential loss of their own lives. The prioritizing of objects over people, however, is more apparent when they do catch the thief. The man succumbs to his hunter instincts and reverses his prey status. In this change, he abandons his "good guy" values in his search for vengeance. The

encounter with the thief is interesting on many levels. First, when held at gun point, the thief raises his hands showing his missing fingers. The man deduces that “He was an outcast from one of the communes” (McCarthy 210). This fact reminds us that communities do exist but their new brutal laws pushed them to exile and cut off the fingers of one their members (probably as punishment). Second, the man’s treatment of the stranger violates his former code of ethics. Blinded by rage and his position of power (as the hunter), he orders the thief to undress and leaves him “Standing there raw and naked, filthy, starving. Covering himself with his hand. He was already shivering” (211). Despite his son’s pleas to show mercy to another hungry soul clinging to life, the man was determined to abide by the “eye for an eye” principle. He tries to apologize to his son, justifying his deed by claiming that he did not shoot the thief, but the boy’s reply reminds him of the consequences of his action: “But we did kill him” (214). This encounter demonstrates three things. First, it proves that objects of survival are worth more than human life. Second, the thief’s clues to his past shows that meaningful communities were impossible to thrive in a world of primal individualism. Finally, the man’s action reveals how the instinctual “will to survive” robs people of their humanity, blurring the line between good and evil. As Stephen Joyce states, “Again and again, readers are confronted with behavior we would consider inhuman in ways that ask us to rethink what human nature really is” (08).

As seen earlier, the fight over resources and the subjugation of the weak by the predatorial powerful creates an environment devoid of trust, inhospitable to concepts of human connection. Yet, even in the animal kingdom, the value of the family is undisputed. The relationship between father and son can illustrate this point,

providing a redeeming dimension to the world. However, apart from the protagonists, we are introduced to families who abandon their progeny at birth or devour them for sustenance. The abandonment of connection for the sake of individual survival destroys the sanctity of the family because “That loss of mental and emotional commitment to others results in dissociative behavior ranging from the mother’s rejection of her son to people devouring their own infants” (Cooper 223). In *The Road*, the traditional family structure also fails to provide meaning and solace for its members.

4.4.2. The Failure of the Traditional Family Structure and the Reversal of Gender Roles

The wife’s prediction that the man’s survival depends on his son’s reveals an important theme in the novel and one of the last remaining values that outlived total annihilation. It presents filial love as a strong antidote to nihilism. In other words, the father/son relationship proves that “Having a figure to love is here presented as a precondition for survival in this declining world” (Walsh 231). Yet, while the father retained an unshakeable faith in his son, the mother’s despair plunged her into a hopelessness that led to her premature demise. With her decision, she destroyed the family structure and rejected her traditional role of carer and nurturer. This can be read as a mere portrayal of weakness that contrasts with the father’s selfless sacrifice, but it also exposes the fragility of the family. This latter is depicted as a temporary solace which might provide a glimpse of meaning but eventually disintegrates when the individual is faced with his inherent solitude, fully unveiled at the moment of

death. Indeed, even the father eventually dies and the boy has to fend off for himself confirming that the family is a temporary and perhaps illusory coping mechanism that fails to repel man's inherent loneliness.

In order to create an atmosphere of pure hopelessness, the plot required the death of a parent. It deprived the boy from the comfort of a loving circle and it showed that faithless despair destroys even the most instinctual values. Also, it worsened the surviving parent's plight by ensuring "...that the entire burden falls on the individual and not a family structure" (Wilhelm 135). The fact that this burden falls on the father's shoulders is a deliberate decision. McCarthy's portrayal of mothers abandoning or devouring their children is a metaphor for the decaying world and a reversal of the natural order. The planet we inhabit is often referred to as "mother earth" because much like human (or animal) mothers, it is the source of life. In *The Road*, however, the "barren" earth ceases to give. It is cold and indifferent. While in Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, divine abandonment is symbolized by an absent patriarchal power, McCarthy's nihilistic cosmos is characterized by the loss of maternal care. The mother/earth shared impotence is clear when we notice that "In *The Road*, the earth seems incapable of producing new life after the apocalyptic event. Women may become pregnant and bear children, but their children are turned into comestibles" (Cooper 147). With the loss of maternal love (both literal and figurative), the world becomes devoid of compassion and empathy often seen as aspects of the divine feminine (values that miraculously survive in the boy who combines masculine and feminine energies). This desertion of emotions is symbolized by the man's gesture of leaving his wife's picture by the side of the road: "[he] sat

holding the photograph. Then he laid it down in the road also and then he stood and they went on.” (McCarthy 41). This act ended his attachment to sentimentality and signaled a “farewell to previous conceptions of romance...” (Wilhelm 135). Much of the protagonists’ suffering and the father’s increasing brutality is then an indirect consequence of a singular act: the wife’s suicide.

The mother’s self-destruction can be justified. In a pragmatic faithless vision of the world, her decision becomes more rational than the father’s unfounded hope. Her decision is based on what she believed to be an inescapable eventuality. She says: “Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won’t face it. You’d rather wait for it to happen. But I can’t. I can’t” (McCarthy 45). Her judgement is based on reality, an observation of what had happened to many other families. In this, we can say that the woman’s understanding of the world and calculations of the future were more pragmatic and accurate than her husband’s. On the other hand, one can see her opinion as clouded by faithlessness. The presence of a fully-composed family at the end of the novel suggests that their fate was not sealed. In that, she became an embodiment of nihilism, “the avatar of complete hopelessness” (O’Connor 05). Much like Ely, she saw death as a liberator. She described herself as being unfaithful to her family and too infatuated by death’s call to care for the living: “As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart” (McCarthy 46). Her decision betrayed her desertion of human connection. The mother, traditionally the source of love, was unable to see past herself and the suffering of the present moment. She declares that her ability to feel was torn away

from her at the moment of her child's birth: "My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so don't ask for sorrow now. There is none" (46). The woman's nihilistic approach to life can be explained from a psychological standpoint, "as a trope she embodies the human mentality that succumbs to fear and doubt and deprivation because it cannot think beyond the limited scope of the self, one that too readily relinquishes the duty of life, an obligation to which the father so desperately clings" (Wilhelm 135). The mother's departure left a void that haunts the man throughout the novel, and a longing for a sense of community that the boy was unable to find despite his father's efforts.

4.4.3. The Boy's Hopeless Search for Community

The boy's uncorrupted innocence retained a natural inclination towards compassion. He did not succumb to the hunter/prey paradigm and saw even the most dangerous cannibals as tortured souls desperate for meaningful connections. His attitude was that of an extended hand instead of a closed fist and he stayed on the lookout for more "good guys" to practice his generosity. The father was able, at least temporarily, to provide the love and guidance that the boy needed. As a matter of fact, "The tender, mutually nurturing relationship between the father and son in *The Road* suggests at least a faint faith in the human capacity to be moral and achieve meaningful relationships" (Cooper 228). The boy needed his father as much as the father needed him. While the man derived meaning from his divine mission of protecting his son, the boy found it in keeping the fire of "goodness" that his father conferred to him. Even after the man's death, the boy turned to him for guidance.

When he is found by the veteran's family, the woman tells him to speak to God "but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn't forget" (McCarthy 236). Nevertheless, even while his father was alive, the boy kept searching for a bigger sense of community, believing that kindness and compassion, encountered in his father's stories of old, were the only way to dispel the darkness that surrounded him.

The boy's unconditional kindness is alien in the world of *the Road* but it is precisely what makes his father view him as a divine being. It is his messianic quality of forgiveness and generosity that sets him apart and makes him the moral center of the novel. In brief, he is unique because he is the only character to display unconditional empathy. Yet, this empathy is not purely a moral choice, but also a desperate attempt to build community. For instance, after their meeting with Ely, the boy did not only wish to feed him and send him on his way. He pleaded with his father to allow him to join their dinner. Gathering around food is transformed into a ritualistic civilizational practice that allows them to temporarily expand their group. Rick and Jonathan Elmore clarify: "Rather than merely giving the stranger food, the child wants to share a meal with him and to form, even briefly, the bond of bread breaking and some sense of community" (143). The boy's eagerness to find companions even transcends humans. When they hear a dog barking in the distance, the boy's instinctual reaction is to make his father promise not kill it. He operates beyond the hunter/prey dynamics because he sees the animal as a potential companion instead of a possible source of food. More significantly, the boy's desperation forces him to create a mirror image of himself, personified as another child that he believes

he saw. Throughout the novel, the boy expresses his wish to rescue the child and take him with them: “We could get him and take him with us. We could take him and we could take the dog. The dog could catch something to eat” (McCarthy 69). As one can easily deduce, neither the dog nor the child could actually be seen, and while the dog’s barks could be heard, there was no proof of the existence of the other boy. The invisible child that the boy constantly refers to is a projection of his fear of losing his father: “What if that little boy doesn’t have anybody to take care of him? he said. What if he doesn’t have a papa?” (68). It is also a hallucination that betrays his hopeless need for community. Lydia Cooper observes: “It is this final iteration of his desire for the presence of another that reveals his reason for creating an imaginary other” (232). Finally, his vision introduces the theme of morality that fills the pages of the novel. For the boy, to be “good” is to sacrifice for others and “[his] understanding of what morality means is perhaps nowhere so profoundly expressed as in his creation of an “other” child” (Cooper 68). Indeed, the mysterious child meant they could selflessly save and provide for another being. Unfortunately, the boy’s ideals seem divorced from reality, and McCarthy’s depiction of the world shows humans as naturally inclined to embrace ethical nihilism. The absence of an authority to enforce acceptable morals (such as nurturing a child instead of devouring him) renders the boy’s ideas almost meaningless, but his (and his father’s) insistence on enforcing them triggers the questions on humanity and morality that make the philosophical strength of the novel.

4.5. Ruthless Individualism and the Fall of Morality

4.5.1. Violence, Cannibalism and the Supremacy of Evil

It is difficult to determine if ethics are derived from the natural state of man. The concept of pity or mercy, as demonstrated by the boy in the novel, can either be seen as a natural proclivity to empathy, or to borrow Nietzsche's critique, a ruse invented by the weak to prevent the strong from accomplishing their will to power. Whichever the case, it is undeniable that in a society, proper ethics are inculcated and enforced by the dominant culture. Operating beyond the limits of "acceptable behavior" is met with state punishment and/or communal rejection. In *The Road*, however, there is no government nor society to moderate the individual's actions. McCarthy's proposed experiment is to put man in an unsupervised vacuum in which everything is permitted for the sake of survival, and observe whether one can maintain a sense of morality or fall into brutality. Throughout the novel, the latter tendency seems to predominate because individual survival justifies all evil and annuls all good. As Lydia Cooper notes, "In *The Road*, McCarthy paints a picture of a world in which any moral expediency seems justified. The ultimate terror, after all, has already arrived" (233). After the apocalypse, the doors of heaven are shut, and virtue is rendered useless. Violence becomes the only way to impose one's will, fueling the idea that evil, not good, might be the natural state of man.

The fact that there is no power to regulate people's behavior is important to understand McCarthy's thoughts on morality. He seems to hold a Schopenhauerian perspective on the matter, demonstrating that no man can truly be considered good without being tested outside the limitations of the state. Indeed, "For Schopenhauer,

only the individual who accepts the moral boundary between right and wrong where no State or other authority guarantees it can truly be identified as just” (Gallivan 102-103). In *The Road*, only the man and the boy are considered “good guys” because of their ability to demonstrate ethical behavior without being commanded by a figure of authority. For instance, there is no law that prevents them from indulging in cannibalism. On the contrary, it became an almost acceptable norm, necessary for survival. Their clinging to a moral code, however, remains foreign in their world, and McCarthy’s pessimism, present in all his works, is made transparent in the fact that the bulk of humanity abandoned ethics all too easily. Worse than merely indulging in immorality, mankind embraced violence as a way of life, and evil became the new norm. In this novel, evil is embraced and even enjoyed as seen in the roaming gangs of cannibals with their convoys of slaves, captured women and human cattle. Here again, we return to the nihilist nature of the novel that creates a world “...that bears pervasive, ashen testimony of the absolute, continuing failure of ethics, of religion, of government, of diplomacy, of humanity, of everything” (Snyder 69).

The prevalence of justifiable evil can be summarized with one passage from the novel: “By then all stores of food had given out and murder was everywhere upon the land. The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes...” (McCarthy 148). This observation reveals the causes of the disintegration of morals, noting that the scarcity of food forced people to return to a “bestial” state, governed by their reptilian brain and incapable of discerning right from wrong. At the same time, it shows that the natural response to food shortages was not mutual help but murder. For the animalistic mind, violence is the only

guarantee for survival and it exceeds all boundaries in the way it is executed, culminating in the act devouring someone's child before one's eyes. This shows that violence is etched in human instincts and that, in dire circumstances, it leaves the realm of "evil", transcends (or rather transgresses) the codes of ethics, and becomes a mere necessity for survival.

Cannibalism is the ultimate manifestation of justifiable evil in the novel but despite being a pervasive threat, it is never portrayed in detail. The protagonists discover boiled piles of bones, slaves with missing limbs, but never directly witness the act. This is a common trope in this type of fiction, with certain exceptions such as Thomas Harris's *Hannibal Lecter* novels. Jordan Dominy clarifies: "in cannibal literatures the readers rarely ever witness the act of consumption, but stumblingly arrive to view the scene in its aftermath, creating a strange, dreadful sight [...] detaching the reader from the deed and leaving the mind to visualize its own terror" (147). *The Road* is no exception, the horror of cannibalism is left to the imagination, as if depicting the scene would diminish its gravity. Also, the limited narrator follows the "good guy", making the refusal to describe cannibalism a way to emphasize their obstinate refusal to indulge in it. On the other hand, their discovery of the aftermath of the horror reminds the reader of the ineluctability of evil.

Nowhere in the novel does the sense of evil and desperation become more palpable than in the scene of the charred infant. On the road, the protagonists see a small plume of smoke coming from the woods. The man decides to investigate and they head towards a small camp. The people had left, taking everything with them except a "black thing" that burned on the fire. Upon seeing it, the boy is overwhelmed

by shock and terror, “What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit” (McCarthy 163). With this scene, dehumanization reaches its pinnacle since even beasts shelter their young. Here, all moral boundaries are desecrated. The boy is appalled by the violence of the scene and haunted by the thought that he could meet a similar end. The discovery affects him more than physical pain or hunger, and he keeps silent for so long that his father thought he would never speak again. Randall Wilhelm explains: “The sight has nearly devastated the boy, and in his weakened state he is silent and still, gestures that evoke a child’s potential fate without guardianship in this brutal world” (139). The scene also shows the self-destructive dimension of violence and cannibalism. Eating human flesh starts as an obsessive focus on individual survival but ends as a complete disregard of the human race as a whole. The natural drive of ensuring the continuity of the species is replaced by extreme egotism, signaling a slow extinction of humanity. In this, the fall of morality is another form of suicide because “The consumption of the young thus seems to reflect not just actual hunger in these scavenging hoards but also a desire to cut short the degenerate and degenerating remains of the race under discussion—in the case of *The Road*, humanity itself” (Cooper 140).

The philosophical strength of the novel does not lie in the utter nihilism of the world but in the protagonists’ struggle to resist it. The question of whether or not morality can survive amidst violent survivalism is symbolized by the desperate act of “carrying the fire”, a metaphor of the protagonist’s clinging to the concept of “good”. In other words, “The ethical force of *The Road* develops through the way father and son can sustain ethical possibility despite their predicament and the brutal reality of

the cosmos” (O’Connor 05). The task is not always obvious, and in many instances, the man falls short of his duty and indulges in violence to the point that he barely differentiates between his reflected image and that of the brutes he tries to evade. As mentioned before, the man and the boy are very different in their perception of what constitutes ethical behavior, but before viewing them as separate entities, one must consider them as some of the last survivors of a dying breed; the “good guys”. This self-proclaimed badge is first assigned to those who do not indulge in cannibalism but expands to include a whole system of ethics that their world seems to have forgotten. They are “good” “because they hold fast to those rigidly human qualities that the novel posits we are very much not “post”: love, hope, courage” (Kunsa 68).

5. “Carrying the Fire” and the Promise of Moral Revival

In the novel, the most obvious mode of keeping one’s humanity is manifested through the protagonists’ refusal to eat human flesh. As seen earlier, the dehumanization of the inhabitants of *The Road* starts with a disregard for others for the sake of personal survival. Violent individualism forces people to see others as a means to an end, an object of consumption instead of a member of one’s own species. The man and the boy, on the other hand, are ready to face starvation to serve their ideals. This decision is best illustrated through the following dialogue:

We wouldn’t ever eat anybody, would we?

No. Of course not.

Even if we were starving?

We're starving now.

You said we weren't.

I said we weren't dying. I didn't say we weren't starving.

But we wouldn't.

No. We wouldn't.

No matter what.

No. No matter what.

Because we're the good guys.

Yes.

And we're carrying the fire.

And we're carrying the fire. Yes.

(McCarthy 102)

The protagonists view the consumption of other human beings as a violation of their code, and the boy insists on honoring it even if it costs them their lives. Jordan Dominy notes: "In an environment where what the reader would perceive as civilization does not exist, the boy and man differentiate themselves from the bloodcults in their refusal to consume the remains of people. The aversion to cannibalism becomes a method for emphasizing the man and boy's humanity" (146). This decision seems impractical and counterintuitive for the survivalist's mind, but the father and son are motivated by a sense of purpose instead of a primitive attachment to life. When the traditional institutions of family and religion failed to produce meaning, they were compelled to create their own. They created the concept of "carrying the fire" and they were soon governed by the tenants of the new self-

imposed creed. The boy's eagerness to help and his refusal to destroy were more important than his hunger, as seen in his readiness to give Ely some of their rations knowing that it will deplete them more quickly. Individualistic pursuits do not matter because "[f]or the boy, in *The Road*, the most important thing is always to know that he and his father are 'carrying the fire.' In this ideal, lies his feeling of power, and all of his actions are undertaken with it in mind" (Davies 98). The man, mostly following the boy's higher sense of good, also strived to maintain this code although his main reason to live remained the protection of his son. What "carrying the fire" means is never fully explained, and even the boy doubts the existence of such "fire". Yet, the many symbols of light and darkness that fill the pages of novel offer a clearer explanation.

Fire and light, in the literal sense, are necessities of survival. A big portion of the novel is spent lighting campfires, gathering plywood, siphoning gasoline and fueling the lighter. Yet these objects also carry with them a more symbolic form of light, a projection of an inner proclivity for "good". For instance, when the lighter exposes the horror of the captives waiting for slaughter, the father drops it when trying to escape. His encounter with the brutality of the world, as well as his passive participation in it (through his unwillingness to help) caused his "inner light" to dim down, represented by the lost lighter and the sudden plunge into darkness. Here, the man failed to carry the fire which is, according to Donovan Gwinner, "a metaphor that connotes civilization itself, civility as honorable behavior, and that which is sacred" (148). If a cowardly action dims one's sense of "honorable civility", expressions of compassions and kindness are the things that ignite it. For this reason, the boy is often

seen as emitting light, physically seen by his dying father. The man watching his son selflessly tend to him in his final hours sees a light resembling a saintly aura that floats about the boy: “He watched him come through the grass and kneel with the cup of water he’d fetched. There was light all about him [...] He took the cup and moved away and when he moved the light moved with him” (McCarthy 227-228). In this scene, one can easily argue that it is only fatherly love that projected a vision of light into his son, and in many occasions, it comes as Christian symbolism that represents the man’s tendency of attributing messianic qualities to the boy. Yet, even the father’s fantasies about his son’s divinity do not come naturally. They stem from the boy’s unshakeable sense of empathy. It is the beauty of his innocent sense of goodness that illuminates him because “Light, of course, provides the foundation for all beauty, regardless of cultural ideologies, because through light the world’s form and coherence is revealed” (Wilhelm 140). The boy, however, fails to see the light and it causes him to doubt its very existence. He asks about its location and his father replies: “It’s inside you. It was always there. I can see it” (McCarthy 229).

There is no guarantee that the protagonists’ task of carrying the fire would survive, and the fact that the light follows only the boy suggests that by the end of the novel, only one of them succeeds in keeping the torch lit. The seemingly optimistic ending, with the encounter of another family of “good guys” might appear as a reward for the boy’s stubborn sense of good but, as will be seen later, the ending is much more nuanced than a mere retrieval of hope. Still, if we suspend our cynicism, it is undoubtable that the sense of purpose that the protagonists carried gave them a reason to survive and justified their suffering although they approached their goal differently.

Indeed, the father and son had different ways of displaying their sense of ethics. The father followed a code of pragmatic morality in which doing good upon others depended largely on his own benefit. His generosity rarely exceeded his aversion to cannibalism and brutality, and his mission of protecting his son trumped over the task of carrying the fire. On the other hand, the boy shows a complete dedication to the latter, willingly sacrificing his sense of safety for the benefit of others. This pure yet juvenile sense of heroism is both impractical and dangerous in McCarthy's world. The protagonists' morality is then the only force that counters the ethical nihilism of the novel, but it is itself divided between the conditional morality of the father and the selfless sacrifice of the boy. This conflict raises questions on the nature of moral values and the possibility (or impossibility) of sustaining them.

4.6. The Two Faces of Morality

4.6.1. The Man: Pragmatic Morality and the Will to Survive

There are little details in the novel that describe the man's life before the cataclysm. When he is asked if he were a doctor, he replies by saying "I am not anything" (McCarthy 52), suggesting that all past identities melted in the collective fall of the apocalypse. Yet, his resourcefulness and the vocabulary he uses betray certain elements of his personality that explain his attachment to morality and his pragmatic attitudes towards it. First, he is portrayed as the archetype of American masculinity, as imagined in the western genre that McCarthy is well familiar with. He is self-reliant and skillful in the art of survival, explained by his past fishing trips with

his own father. He is also fearless and familiar enough with fire arms to be able not only to use them properly, but to carve out perfectly-fitting fake bullets that scare away their assailers. Finally, his unshakable determination truly paints him as a postapocalyptic “cowboy”, with phrases such as “This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They don’t give up” (McCarthy 109). In brief, despite his tragic end, the man is a classical American masculine hero struggling to keep a glimmer of light against all odds. Rick and Jonathan Elmore write: “He is the very picture of rugged American individualism with his stereotypically masculine proclivity for tools and guns, his knowledge of woodcraft and survivalism, his no tears attitude, and his dogged persistence” (137). At the same time, the man is not only a resilient brute fending off attackers. He often demonstrates his knowledge by using elaborate vocabulary to describe things around him. For instance, during his first encounter with the road rat, he says: “Because the bullet travels faster than sound. It will be in your brain before you can hear it. To hear it you will need a frontal lobe and things with names like colliculus and temporal gyrus and you won’t have them anymore. They’ll just be soup” (McCarthy 52). It is this description that made the attacker believe he was a doctor and although he denied it, one can see that the man was at least highly educated. There are clear traces of formal education, as well as a plethora of practical skills that he picked up from his rural upbringing. Later in the novel, when the boy gets a fever, the man hesitates to give him the antibiotics they found because “they had a short shelflife” (204). Both this specific knowledge and the words used (shelf-life is mostly used by doctors and pharmacists) suggest that the man had been in the

business of saving lives which explains his predisposition to do good, or at least his aversion to do harm.

What sets the man apart from other traditional heroes is that, early in the novel, we are introduced to his severe coughing episodes. His lungs were already saturated with the ash that engulfed his world and his condition worsens as the narrative progresses. The man was aware of his impending death, an important detail that can change our reading of the novel. *The Road* is not a story of a man clinging to life. It is the story of a father fighting for his son's survival. It is then understandable that he often compromised his moral sense for the sake of his divine mission. The reader is also made aware of the man's inevitable doom. The author does not dissimulate the fact that "the father in *The Road* is marked for death; he knows it and so do we" (Cant 187). This situation is aggravated when he is shot by an arrow, and when he jumps into freezing water to scavenge an abandoned yacht ironically named Pájaro de Esperanza (bird of hope). The reader, much like the father, has to shift his attention towards the boy, wishing for his survival and expecting him to continue carrying the fire on his own.

Despite his higher sense of good, the boy's morality was derived from his father. This latter, being a product of a dead world, relied on stories of old and beliefs of a lost civilization to construct it. His memory, often tinted by his sense of longing, constituted his foundation for ethical behavior. In other words, his definition of good is determined by the moral standards of his time. Patrick O'Connor explains: "the struggle to remember and to reinforce the past is simultaneous with his struggle to be ethical. The preservation of cultural memory, customs, and inherited tradition is all a

father without a future can do to teach a child values in the face of cold reality, offering relief from his perpetual realism and pragmatism” (07). This method quickly reveals its limitations. While he indeed taught his son the basics of human decency, he was unable to adapt to a world that needed to be illuminated by a renewed sense of values. That is why the father’s light continued to dim and his actions were less and less ethical. His hope to retrieve the old order was futile and his reliance on old principles of individualism and the brutal justice of the “eye for an eye” is what precipitated humanity’s fall in the first place. This is a detail that reminds us that *The Road* is one of McCarthy’s later works in which he wishes to pass on the torch, suggesting that the future of humanity cannot be built solely on memory. In this novel, “McCarthy delivers an anti-conservative message: one cannot satisfactorily retrieve the past, there is no golden age, and any attempt to construct memory, to fortify it, to make it immune from contamination, is automatically negated” (O’Connor 09). The portrait of the man gives ample justification for his actions. He is a rugged and intelligent man with a strong sense of justice, relying on memory to maintain human values, but forced to compromise them to ensure his son’s survival. Pressed by the weight of his imminent death, he shifts all his attention towards his son whom he views as a spiritual savior in a meaning-starved world.

It is established that the man’s reason for delaying his inevitable death is to ensure his son’s safety, and his first rule of carrying the fire is to avoid cannibalism. To keep his humanity, he had “...to articulate a role for himself and his son in this predatory world that is neither that of the consumer nor that of the consumed” (Cooper 140). With this obsession with immediate needs, the man had no intention of

retrieving a sense of community or perpetuating civilizational values that would, as it were, “heal” the world of its meaninglessness. The boy himself noticed his father’s shortsightedness, asking: “what are our long-term goals?” (McCarthy 129). The man is amazed by this question, a fact that shows that while he could not break from the present, his son’s energy was geared towards the future. He simply replies by saying that he did not know, and asks his son to hurry before sunset in an attempt to bring his attention back to the present. Since his attention could not extend beyond their small group and their immediate safety, the moral ideals with which he inculcated his son quickly became ambiguous.

To protect his son, the man continually trades his empathy for violence. His metamorphosis to a heartless survivor, almost indistinguishable from other “bad guy” can be seen through his encounters with others. At first, his pragmatism is manifested through his refusal to help, a fact that often upsets his son who associates goodness with generosity. Early on, when they pass by a man who had been struck by lightning, the boy begs his father to offer their help. The man only replies by a sharp “No. We can’t help him. There’s nothing to be done for him” (McCarthy 40). For the man, every encounter is a potential threat and every meal or bottle of water given increases the risk of running out of supplies. When they see the group of captives in a basement, the man runs off, not even trying to leave the trapdoor open. Initially, the boy understands the reluctance to help, “...we couldn’t help them because then they’d eat us too” (101). Yet, selfishness becomes a pattern that pushes the boy to question his father’s morality. The unwillingness to extend a helping hand continues throughout the novel, with a few exceptions such as Ely who was conveniently met after they had

discovered a fallout shelter stocked with resources. This attitude confuses the boy who had been raised listening to stories of heroism. The man's behavior was at odds with his moral lessons hastening his son's disillusionment. The boy eventually refuses to listen to more stories saying: "But in the stories we're always helping people and we don't help people" (220).

The man does not shy away from violence, although this latter is sometimes justified. Unlike his son who is often willing to forgive, the man always retaliates. When the cannibal grabs his son, he does not hesitate to shoot him in the head, splattering his brain matter all over the boy's hair. While this first violent encounter sparks some remorse in the man, the brutality of his world quickly hardens his heart. Later in the novel, when he is shot in the leg by an arrow, the man fires his flare gun and burns the attacker whose screams could be heard from their cover. In this case, there is no sign of remorse, nor does he apologize to his son for exposing him to such violence. He simply limps towards the house in which the bowman was posted. There, "A woman was sitting in the corner holding the man. She'd taken off her coat to cover him. As soon as she saw him she began to curse him" (McCarthy 217). The protagonist feels no pity, although the scene could have reminded him of his own family. To him, the woman was no different than an injured animal growling in fear. His perception dehumanized other survivors and showed his complete disinterest in community. It also signaled the beginning of his own moral disintegration. Clearly, the encounter with the thief is the most significant sign of the man's lost morality. As seen earlier, his unjustified punishment, leaving the thief naked and hungry by the side of the road, traumatized the boy. More importantly, it marked a point of no

return. At that moment, the man had completely given up on human empathy and embraced brutal individualism. Resentful towards humanity and sensing his hour approaching, the man completely abandons the idea of community.

The man's obsession with his son's safety makes him lose sight of his ethical vision. He knows that his extreme pragmatism cost him his moral integrity. Stephen Joyce writes: "In the man's quest to protect the boy he becomes almost indistinguishable from "the bad guys" he continually warns his son against. The road gangs justify their actions in the name of survival; the man justifies his actions in the name of his son's survival. The difference becomes increasingly small as the novel progresses" (10). The man's awareness of this similarity, though only subconscious, is symbolized by his reaction to his mirror reflection. As they entered a solitary house, "They came upon themselves in a mirror and he almost raised the pistol. It's us, Papa, the boy whispered. It's us" (McCarthy 105). The boy, with his uncorrupted perception and his clearcut distinction between good and bad, immediately recognized their reflection. The man, on the other hand, was ready to engage in violence, which had become a second nature. He mistook himself for one of the cannibals because he subconsciously knew that he became what he feared. Here again, it is the child that holds the torch that illuminates their vision, indicating that he is the true moral center of the novel.

4.6.2. The Boy: Moral Purity and Redemption through Self-sacrifice

It is in the chaos of the postapocalyptic world that the boy was born. He was in his mother's womb when the cataclysm happened, for when the man noticed "A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (that can be translated either as an atomic bomb or a meteor strike), the mother "...was standing in the doorway in her nightwear, clutching the jamb, cradling her belly in one hand" (McCarthy 42). The boy was conceived during the optimism of ignorance but was born in the hopelessness of humanity's fall. His mother, consumed by the meaninglessness of survival, had taken death as "a new lover" (46) and followed him into eternal nothingness. His father on the other hand, saw his child as a savior, a Christ-like figure who would liberate the world from its darkness. The boy does show an unprecedented level of compassion without any reference to a past civilization. His father's education is apparent through the stories he grew up listening to and the fact that he knew how to read and write. However, it is his own acute sense of good, seemingly devoid of selfishness, that sets him apart. His morality, unlike his father's, is based on self-sacrifice thus earning him a divine aura. It must be noted, however, that the narrator relies on the man's point of view. As such, much of his description is colored by the father's adoration. Indeed, the man based his every action on this reverence. As Donovan Gwinner observes: "The father's "worship" of his son, who is the reference point against which everything else is considered, compels every move, measurement, glassing, surveying, and act of scavenging" (139). It is no wonder then to see the man dread his son's silence, fall into penitence whenever he exposes him to the horror of the world, and constantly seek his approval through a faint "you did good papa"

(McCarthy 98). The closest thing to religiousness in the novel is the man's adoration of his son.

There are many passages that depict the boy as a divine being. At the beginning of the novel, the man remarks: "If he is not the word of God, God never spoke" (McCarthy 06). The religious reference is instantly established since, in the Christian tradition, Jesus is described as the word of God. The same reference is used when the boy is depicted as a "Golden chalice, good to house a god" (60). In addition to the strong Christian symbol of the chalice, we can also establish a similarity with Jesus who, as a man, was made into a vessel that housed the spirit of God. According to Lydia Cooper, even the original title had a strong religious significance that revealed that the novel revolved around the boy. She writes: "The novel's title in an early draft was *The Grail*, a title illustrative of the narrative arc in which a dying father embarks on a quest to preserve his son, whom he imagines as a "chalice", the symbolic vessel of divine healing in a realm blighted by some catastrophic disease" (219). The boy's goodness transcends his own existence. His character is perceived as the way, at least symbolically, to heal the individualism, consumerism and moral disintegration of McCarthy's times, hyperbolized in the novel. He is divine in the sense that he represents the spiritual dimension needed to restore values in both the postapocalyptic world of the novel, and the postmodern reality of the author. Lydia Cooper notes: "The grail, then, becomes a metaphor for that which is capable of healing a world terribly in need of spiritual or moral renewal" (220).

Evidently, the boy's "extreme" morality often comes out as a burden for the father who is sometimes overwhelmed by the unbending code of conduct that his son

tries to impose. The boy constantly presses his father to share their supplies with anyone they encounter, and he begs him to forgive even when their lives are at stake. He expands the no-cannibalism rule to include the dog which he makes his father promise not to kill. Ely, the only other character who understands the boy's worth refuses to bend to his influence. His repudiation of the boy's divinity starts with a mere refusal to show decency and thank him. When the man asks "what if I said that he's a God?", Ely replies: "It's better to be alone. So I hope that's not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it's not true. Things will be better when everybody's gone" (McCarthy 141). This statement goes beyond mere nihilism. It expresses the dreadful burden of protecting the last hope of restoring spirituality. Also, as Phillip Snyder explains, "What may be terrible about travelling with this boy/god revolves around the ethical pressure he always brings to bear on his father" (81). Despite Ely's warnings, the man commits himself to an utter leap of faith and places his salvation in the child's hands.

Despite their rarity, the encounters with other survivors constitute the basis of the novel's ethical debate. It is in those moments that the difference between the man and the boy's definition of morality can be contrasted. The main difference is that while the man keeps his own (and his son's) best interest in mind, the boy bases his judgement on selflessness and self-sacrifice. As Christopher Davies notes, "The man makes choices based solely on their consequences for himself and his son, whereas the latter responds compassionately to those they come across, often disregarding the consequences of his actions for himself" (78). The father only gives when his cart is completely full, and only stops to help when he is certain of their own safety. While

this attitude seems sensible, it is based on the same individualism that divided his world into strong predators and weak preys. It perpetuates the same egoism that exists in both the author's reality and his dark fiction. It is also, as Stephen Joyce argues, expedient to show generosity from a position of comfort. Joyce writes: "It is easy to be generous when living near well-stocked supermarkets; in a barren world, how quickly would our higher ideals vanish?" (10). What sets the boy apart, and equates him to a saintly figure, is his ability to remain openhanded even in moments of scarcity. Shrinking from danger would be the natural response of a child, and it is indeed dangerous to give without calculation. Yet, it is this exact mindset that gives him a Christ-like aura and the miracle he provides is his ability show altruism despite the selfishness that is constantly demanded from him. At this point, one might argue that without the father's pragmatism, the boy would not have survived. Yet, the same strict prudence prevented the pair from joining a community, and it is only after the father's death that the boy could finally encounter another family of "good guys". Indeed, the man's pragmatism was based on fear, a negative sentiment that views everyone as a threat. Fear creates separation, distrust and eventually hatred. Lydia Cooper argues that the novel can be read as a criticism of the generalized fear of the "other" that prevails in both our world and *The Road's* postapocalyptic cosmos. She writes: "A more nuanced reading of the novel, however, suggests that it is fear that is to blame for this violence, and fear that makes of others an 'Other'" (148). The boy's moral strength lies in his ability to overcome fear, to accept the possible risks of his actions while affirming his values of generosity and compassion. To truly carry the fire, one must risk plunging into darkness. Cooper continues, "The boy postulates that

an attitude of constant fear might cause them to miss out on finding other ‘good guys’ on the road [...] As the novel’s moral center, he exemplifies the capacity of compassion to triumph over fear” (148).

The boy’s fearlessness is not a sign of immaturity for he is always aware of the consequences of his actions. His ideology is the opposite of naivety; it is the strength to defy the norms in order to impose his will. This attitude is both Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean in nature. As seen earlier, for Schopenhauer, to be truly deemed good, one must preserve his sense of ethics even in the absence of a governing system that imposes moral values. The boy is not compelled by a law, nor bound by religion, “Neither divine agency nor a human institution governs his actions” (Davies 69). Despite being educated by his father, he often goes against his commands and gets frustrated by his pragmatism, indicating that “the distinction that the boy draws between good and evil is largely located in his own sense of value, as opposed to a socially accepted code of ethics” (69). This fully paints him as the personification of Schopenhauer’s ethics, and to some extent, the author’s understanding of morality. The boy is the moral center of the story because, unlike all other characters, he is able to impose his humane values in an inhumane world without guidance or compulsion. He displays generosity naturally without the need to conform or emulate other people’s behavior. At the same time, the boy’s stubborn attachment to his personal views and his determination to impose his own code of conduct is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*. The boy relies neither on circumstances nor on changing attitudes to base his opinion of the world. Moreover, he seeks to construct a new code of ethics divorced from all past influences and one that even his father fails to keep up

with. Lydia Cooper notes: “while the father may be able to persist into the new, strange world, his son is capable of creating new meaning, new codes of civility, and a new ethic of care” (149).

It is true that Nietzsche was not concerned with ethics and often considered them as a hurdle to one’s will to power. However, his aversion to morality is not due to a belief in its meaninglessness but to the fact that, in his time, good conduct was imposed by institutions such as the state and the church instead of stemming from one’s own judgement. Nietzsche’s ideal man can demonstrate compassion, for instance, but only if it is not compelled by socially-accepted norm such as Christian charity. In *The Dawn of Day*, he wrote:

I should not, of course, deny—unless I were a fool—that many actions which are called immoral should be avoided and resisted; and in the same way that many which are called moral should be performed and encouraged; but I hold that in both cases these actions should be performed from motives other than those which have prevailed up to the present time. (88-89)

In *The Road*, the boy’s morality is not based on any system, and it encourages rather than suppresses his independence. This fact makes him akin to a Nietzschean Superman, ready to elevate humanity because, contrary to popular belief, Nietzsche’s aim in rejecting traditional values (which he thought were gradually decaying) is to improve the human race, not degrade it. Indeed, “Nietzsche, in proposing a move away from the values of civilisation, points towards an imagined future in which we surpass humanity, not destroy it” (Davies 70). In the same way, the boy rejects the

values of his time to impose an improved way of living that goes beyond mere survival, and injects human connections with meaning that everyone seemed to have forgotten.

4.7. The End of The Road: Hope in the Midst of Chaos

The man's death was inevitable from the opening of the narrative, but it was precipitated by his stubborn insistence on keeping an individualistic pragmatism that prevented him from finding a community. His death not only liberated the boy from prudent "othering", but also gave him the opportunity to fully assert his ethical superiority. The seemingly optimistic ending of the novel appears to be the author's approval of the boy's character. It resembles a moralistic tale or a religious parable that echoes the father's promise/wish that "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (McCarthy 231). After keeping vigil for two days next to his father's lifeless body, the boy is approached by a man who claims to be "one of the good guys" (232), and confirms that he was "carrying the fire", although he did not understand what the boy meant. He also reveals that he had two children, suggesting that he held on to the value of family. The stranger also proves his good faith by leaving a blanket to cover the father's body and allowing the boy to keep his pistol. The boy is then conveniently accepted by a new family of "good guys". The stranger's wife immediately takes the boy in her arms, offering a glimpse of motherly love, and speaks to him about God, revealing her spirituality and her belief in the all but forgotten sanctity of the universe. At first glance, the novel offers a happy ending. The boy's goodness is divinely rewarded and his faith is restored. This conclusion,

however, would be too simplistic and uncharacteristic of McCarthy who often offers pessimistic or at least more nuanced endings. Many of his readers were disappointed by the abrupt providential arrival of saviors; an encounter that seems at odds with the tragic trajectory of the narrative. Indeed, “The common complaint against McCarthy’s ending is that it is *deus ex machina*, that the novel ending with the child being saved by a family of “good guys” is incompatible with hopelessness and bedlam McCarthy has provided throughout the novel” (Moon 67). This incompatibility only appears when the novel is read superficially because the ending is far from being a traditional triumph.

The ending of *The Road* is characterized by uncertainty. Even if we believe in the sincerity of the strangers, the boy still lives in a dying world governed by violent individualism. Food resources are still waning, and the cannibalistic, slave-owning gangs that roam the wasteland still divide the world into hunters and preys. As Randall Wilhelm notes, “the austere conclusion ultimately yields little certainty as to what will become of the boy or his newfound protectors” (142). Also, and perhaps more importantly, even the boy’s father, who taught him the basis of ethical behavior, saw his moral code progressively crumble under the pressure of survivalism. The new family might show an aversion to cannibalism but there is no guarantee that they would keep the same values when their situation becomes more dire. After all, we know very little of these new characters’ personalities, let alone how firm their sense of ethics can be. Dana Phillips explains: “Given the status quo, we can assume they are folk of what passes for sterling moral quality and devout spirituality. But what we cannot tell is how pragmatic their dietary strictures and faith will prove to be in the

long term, or—more to the point—if there will be a long term, insofar as they and their scant few fellow human beings are concerned” (186). It is indeed impossible to predict the fate of these characters since we do not know if they, or their morality, will survive the brutality of their reality. What McCarthy offers us is not naïve optimism, but hope. Hope, in many ways, can be the very theme of the novel. There is a promise that meaning can indeed be found even in the selfishness and moral decay of both *The Road*’s cosmos and the author’s reality. In other words, even when “All is lost”, “McCarthy’s text insists that there is reason for hope, not for a return to the old but for the possibilities of the new” (Elmore and Elmore 139). This hope resides in our ability to transcend the immediate needs of our consumerist culture. It is a promise that if we look past the limiting individualism of our time, we can build meaningful communities despite their inherent fragility and constant risk of disintegration. *The Road* is then an invitation to courage in its purest sense: to accept the brutality of life and the inevitability of death, and still assert and defend humanity’s highest values with a practical yet optimistic gaze towards the future.

4.8. Conclusion

Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* is not a mere postapocalyptic tale that exploits post 9/11 fears of total destruction. It is a novel that raises important philosophical questions about the nature of humanity and its ability to maintain values such as connection and morality even in the absence of a governing system. The contrast between the desolate world and the protagonists’ ethical code offers us a blend of materialistic nihilism and spiritual optimism. The general tone of the novel is bleak,

and most of the characters are destined to sacrifice all remnants of civility for the sake of survival. Yet, there remains, between episodes of brutality and despair, a glimmer of hope that never dies in the novel.

The world of *The Road* offers little solace for the pessimistic mind. It paints civilization as a fragile construct, easily demolished by the general return to primitivity. The big cataclysm, either natural or human-made, reduced the landscape into a wasteland of ash that none of the big technological advances could remedy. Supermarkets, as a symbol of consumerism, were quickly ransacked, and all the reserves of food that created a semblance of abundance were unable to escape the hordes of panicked consumers governed by individualism and pressed by their fear of death. Governments quickly fell, and people were left to their own devices. All sense of community was replaced by a rush to power. The control of resources became a control of people since slaves and human cattle became the main source of subsistence. Even the family structure, that could have offered a refuge from hopelessness, disintegrated under the pressure of survival. Infants became food for their desperate parents, and mothers, unable to witness the fate of their children, rushed to meet the call of death. Even spirituality and religion, as the last ramparts against complete nihilism, died out when prayers were met with silence, and suffering was neither alleviated nor justified. In the middle of chaos, and in the absence of the values of order, family, and religion, survivors fully embraced their animalistic nature. They turned into cannibalism, hunting their own kin and satisfying their every base desire with complete impunity. The rule of the strongest hastened the

dehumanization of all survivors, who became either depraved monster or frightened preys clinging to life.

Facing the meaningless of their universe, the protagonists, a father and son bound by a divine purpose, cling to the idea of civilization and maintain a strong sense of ethics. Pressured by the boy's strict morality and his Nietzschean strength in asserting his will, the two undertake the task of carrying the fire, a metaphorical light that keeps them human and separates them from the cannibalistic hoards and the hopeless victims. The protagonists stand out because of their refusal to give in to the demands of their reality, although the father, sensing his death approaching, slowly released his grip on values. His pragmatic ethics, which were dependent on selfish motives, could not withstand the corruption of the world. His overprotectiveness and his shortsighted goals made him progressively stray from his own code of ethics, to the point where he could hardly differentiate between his own reflection and the image of the "bad guys" he tried to escape. The boy on the other hand, maintained an almost saintly ability for compassion. He viewed every encounter as an opportunity to help and longed for a sense of community. His wishes, however, could not be met until the death of his father who had been a hurdle to his open acceptance of the risk attached to opening one's heart to others. The final encounter with the family of "good guys" might not be as hopeful as it seems, since the last passages are pervaded by a sense of eerie uncertainty. However, it asserts the author's idea of hope. It posits the idea that even if humanity is inherently prone to evil, values still inject life with meaning. The final passages summarize the novel's message. Civilization is fragile and unsustainable, the world is governed by randomness and uncertainty, and humans

are egocentric creature that might not deserve to survive. Yet, individuals must accept these truths, and still affirm the highest values of faith, ethics and courage, for these principals are the only way to restore the meaning of existence and keep the ghost of nihilism at bay.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

GENERAL CONCLUSION

This thesis has dealt with the growing nihilism and existential emptiness that afflicts late-capitalist American society. It dove into the cultural, psychological and social roots of the general mood of cynicism and purposelessness that became one of the central themes of postmodern literature since the end of the Second World War. Through the study of three novels written at the turn of the twenty-first century, it exposed the causes and consequences of abandoning traditional values. The examination of the main characters' feeling of insignificance in the face of an indifferent cosmos, and their quest to restore meaning has demonstrated that life without governing ideals becomes a futile cycle of suffering. These individuals, like Sisyphus, drag their empty weight towards a desired yet illusive sense of happiness only to fall back into the mundanity of their reality. Capitalism, consumerism, conformity and the culture of selfish individualism have eclipsed traditional values such as morality, religion and community. As a consequence, with the exception of the boy in McCarthy's *The Road*, all characters fail to locate the real causes of the nihilism that permeates their culture. They project their self-doubts onto one or other aspect of their society, and they fabricate coping-mechanisms to drown their existential angst.

The obstinate attachment to a higher purpose seen in the last chapter demonstrates a fundamental fact about nihilism. All hopelessness dissipates at the contact of values. This is the reason why Friedrich Nietzsche urged individuals to craft their own sense of meaning. Without a strong enough reason, all actions are

rendered useless until existence itself becomes futile. This constitutes the basis of human motivation. Man acts to reach a potential heaven or to escape a potential hell. Even a simple act like waking in the morning must be urged by the promise of food, work or other meaningful pursuits, or pressed by a natural discomfort or a fear of being dismissed from one's profession. Without a clear reason, many discouraged youths today, afflicted by the nihilism of their time, introduced the concept of "bed rotting", whereby they spend entire days sleeping, scrolling their phones and refusing to engage in daily activities. While this aspect of meaninglessness might be transitory and overcome by a mere change in circumstances, failing to find a reason to live leads to more disastrous outcomes. The characters in the selected novels, as well as in many other existentialist works, encounter nihilism when they fail to find a satisfactory "heaven and hell". Without a compelling reason to live, they either seek drug-like forgetfulness, self-destruction or destructive rebellion.

The failure to find a satisfactory reason to live has become the daily experience of many people today, especially in Western societies where the certainties of the past are superseded by a relative and constantly-shifting view of the world. Addressing an important contemporary issue may enhance the significance of this thesis and provide an additional perspective. On one hand, the work under consideration is a theoretical analysis of the theme of nihilism in postmodern American literature, as well as the narrative techniques that best illustrate it (plotlessness, fragmented language...). On the other hand, it attempts to understand the real-life implications of the phenomenon. Indeed, the characters of the three novels reflect the concerns of many individuals who bathe in an environment of

pessimism and purposelessness. By delving into their fragmented psyche, we attempted to determine the reasons for the emergence of postmodern nihilism, its effect on people, and possible solutions to overcome it. The conclusion drawn from this analysis was that it all stemmed from a rejection of traditional values.

Traditional values have always provided an easy, preconstructed way of countering meaninglessness. Religions, for example, exploit the instinct of pleasure and pain (or heaven and hell) to the fullest, giving a clear path to worshippers, regardless of the veracity of their beliefs. That is why many consider religion as the ultimate value (while others see it as a strong opiate). As seen in the first chapter, it is the continual questioning and criticizing of old beliefs introduced by the Enlightenment and culminating in the twentieth century Existentialism that eventually led to the current crisis of values. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the ideological rejection of traditional values was reinforced by the disillusionment of modern life and the emptiness of capitalism and consumerism. Without a strong foundation or a renewed sense of meaning, it is expected to fall into the postmodern nihilism discussed in this work. Naturally, rejecting old views does not necessarily lead to chaos. Indeed, human laws are fundamentally flawed and some ideas must be demolished. Without humanity's proclivity to question its foundations, many practices such as slavery and imperialism (which were justified and defended as strong pillars of civilization) would still persist. The problem begins when life-affirming principles such as family, spirituality and purpose are devalued without an alternative. Societies often fail to renew their lost values and only fill the void with distractions. It is then the duty of the individual to seek, restore or create his own

sense of purpose. The three novels examined here place the responsibility of restoring meaning on the individual's shoulders. Repeatedly, we see characters who are both victims of nihilism and the only heroes of their lives.

The characters in the three selected novels, particularly in *White Noise* and *Fight Club*, suffer from not being able to free themselves from their existential void. This highlights the difficulty of asserting one's individuality and the ease with which people fall into a herd-like acceptance of their circumstances. The protagonists of the first two novels are the products of their time, and postmodernity is characterized by the prevalence of discouragement and conformity. The lack of direction that these individuals face is inherent to the experience of living in late capitalist America, first because empty instant gratification is glorified and essential to the continuation of over-consumerism that sustains modern economies. Second, and most significantly, because there are no higher ideals to elevate life beyond mere existence. This point is well formulated by Tyler Durden who claims that his generation is lost because it has no great war or great depression to overcome. While it is true that a great strife can break the cycle of mindless living, the third selected novel proves that it is not sufficient to restore meaning. Indeed, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is set in a global cataclysm that would, in a traditional, romantic or even modernist sense, call for heroism and add a sublime dimension to the absurd reality. However, McCarthy's novel is fundamentally postmodern and shaped by the author's experience that dictates that even a large-scale struggle is rendered meaningless in the absence of a convincing motive. In the apocalypse, survival is as, or perhaps more useless than in capitalism, and many characters, including the protagonist's wife, readily embrace

self-destruction instead of heroic opposition. The reasons for this radical choice are no different than before. If we come back to the concept of heaven and hell, one can clearly detect the desperation in McCarthy's cosmos. There is no light at the end of the tunnel, no promised Eden. Instead, suffering is perpetual. In *The Road*, however, unlike all other novels, there seems to be a glimmer of hope, a possibility of overcoming nihilism despite suffering. The boy, and to a smaller degree his father, find a way to not only justify their existence but also maintain their humanity and sense of goodness. This is done by the simple act of believing in a guiding principle. In their case, it is clinging to the seemingly childish idea of being "the good guys", and the moral duty of "carrying the fire". No matter how naïve or out of place their conviction was, it proves a crucial fact and the fundamental claim of this thesis. It shows that higher values are the building blocks of a meaningful existence while abandoning them inevitably leads to confusion and existential despair.

In many ways, nihilism seems to thrive in the authors' times, and the three novels condemn late capitalism as the catalyst for the crisis of purposeless living. Even *The Road* can be read as an indirect critique of a system that failed to create sustainable values, and perpetuated a culture of faithlessness, individualism and consumerism that lasted even after its collapse. This does not mean that the rejection of ideals was born with postmodernity. The first chapter demonstrates that questioning and demolishing preestablished principles has always been a western intellectual tradition well before the idea of nihilism was developed. Classical Greek philosophy already contained early speculation about the meaninglessness of life and the relativity of truth. However, these ideas were confined to the intellectual realm,

whereas the dominant culture offered a plethora of values that governed people's lives and shielded them from existential bewilderment. However, since the end of the Second World War, nihilism was gradually "democratized". It infiltrated American culture and corrupted every sacred belief, from religion, morality, nationalism to the very notion of truth. As seen earlier, it is easier to follow the herd than to assert one's will, and so a culture that rejects higher beliefs unavoidably creates purposeless individuals drowning their angst in hedonistic pursuits lest they sink into an irreversible despair. Some of these wandering souls awaken to their circumstances and strive to regain a reason for their existence. The characters examined in this work are perfect examples of such individuals who refuse to accept their limitations, and through their journey towards redemption, offer the reader a clear insight into the causes and the effects of their crisis of values.

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* introduces the idea of the "simulacra" at a time when science and media abruptly gained a dominant role in people's lives. What this means is that individual experience was no longer authentic and personal but mediated and dictated by a soft-authoritarian system that required automatons rather than conscious beings. In a sea of unreliable information and shifting attitudes, all sense of certainty was swiftly fading, leaving the protagonist, Jack Gladney, without a governing code to direct his life or counter his pathological fear of death. The novel focuses on the confusion that follows the abandonment of objective truth and the futility of life in the absence of spirituality. The growing prevalence of media was much to blame, but it was also the absence of strong convictions that rendered the citizens of Blacksmith highly susceptible to manipulation. In terms more related to

this research, *White Noise* deals with the nihilism that results from the devaluation of truth and meaning. DeLillo's pessimism deprived his protagonist from a positive transformation, but in doing so, painted a vivid representation of the Nietzschean "last man". The common reaction to meaninglessness, predicted by the philosopher, was that of complacency, fear and a desperate search for coping mechanisms. Similarly, Jack Gladney and his contemporaries drown their discomfort in excessive consumerism, identification with larger-than-life figures of the past (and the very idea of a redeeming past), and the use of drugs to suppress the fear of death. The experimental drug "Dylar" represents both science's tendency to reduce humans to organic machines and the addiction to hedonism and distractions as the sole antidote to existential angst. In both cases, humanity's connection to its divine dimension is severed, and life's remaining worth is annihilated by the looming ghost of death.

Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* was written almost a decade after *White Noise*, but the issues raised in DeLillo's novel still remain and, in some cases, even intensify. In *Fight Club*, the controlling power of media shapes people's perception of reality. The consumerism that provided Gladney with "life credit" and bloated his ego, becomes the whole identity of *Fight Club*'s protagonist who identifies with the luxury items in his apartment and considers them an extension of himself. The major difference in this novel is that the plot does not unfold in a mundane rural setting, but in a bustling city, the very heart of capitalism. All vices are inflated, and by extension, all values, deflated. The protagonist has no family, no religion, no purpose, and above all, no identity. His search to regain a sense of self-worth begins with the accumulation of possessions and the infiltration of illness support group. Like

Gladney before him, he chooses disguise and distractions to cover his insecurities. However, when Marla Singer exposes his fakery, he sinks deeper into his despair and emerges with a dissociative personality disorder. His alter ego, Tyler Durden, offers a clear insight into the protagonist's psychological problems. The creation of Tyler introduces the themes of existential and social nihilism, their causes and the way (not) to overcome them. In simple terms, it reveals the values that the protagonist lacks and desperately needs. First, it shows how his "small", empty and repetitive life lacks a higher purpose. Second, it uncovers the emotional void he experienced, and how his past and his damaged self-esteem prevented him from achieving the meaningful relationships that had the potential to cure him.

The rest of the novel reads as a manifesto on how to "reach rock bottom", or to ruin one's life in order to break free from mundanity. With Tyler Durden, the protagonist embarks on a journey of destructive nihilism, starting with the underground fighting ring and culminating in an organized terrorist group, guided by the radical idea that a complete annihilation of the sources of meaninglessness (mainly capitalist and consumerist modern culture) is necessary to rebuild a healthy society. The author exposes the flaws of the cynicism and pessimism of his disillusioned generation. He also portrays grandiose and escapist dreams of heroism as elaborate yet hollow substitutes for real values. For instance, seeing Tyler as a father figure temporarily fills the emotional void that could have been sealed by accepting Marla's love. Palahniuk's romantic touch might seem cliché but it proves that, among other values, genuine human connection can justify existence. Evidently, the novel does not end on a completely positive note. The protagonist is disfigured,

locked in an asylum and still haunted by his illusions. While highlighting the restorative qualities of love and self-worth, the ending seems to suggest that one can never fully recover from nihilism.

The question of morality is brushed upon in all three novels, but it takes the center of the stage in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. To be good and to act honorably has always been a central idea in many philosophies, but it is often dictated by a higher system of values such as religion, or at least serves a utilitarian role such as the harmonious functioning of a civilized society. In *The Road*, the inexplicable "beam of light" that reduced the landscape to ashes erased all signs of governing systems except the primitive law that guarantees the survival of the fittest. To be moral became not only useless, but even dangerous to one's survival. Human relationships are reduced to a power struggle whereby the strong subjugate the weak and live in a relative abundance while the rest of the population starves to death. The reader can easily detect parallels between McCarthy's bleak world and the current capitalist system which influence echoes throughout the novel. Despite being set in a postapocalyptic world, the novel's themes remain relevant and easily applicable to reality. The central question that the novel seems to pose is whether humanity is inherently immoral, and if not, is it possible to create one's own sense of morality in the midst of chaos? What seems clear here is that life without a purpose or a code of conduct is barely worth fighting for, and many characters opted out at the first opportunity. The ethical nihilism that pervades the novel only engendered slavery, cannibalism and an extreme form of individualism that forced mothers to devour their own children. In order to keep one's humanity, the need to mold personal Gods becomes as important as the

need for sustenance. That is why the protagonists assign themselves the duty of “carrying the fire”.

The journey of the father and son in a land of monsters is highly symbolic, closer to a religious parable than to a fictional narrative. This fact offers the opportunity to read it as a philosophical discussion. It demonstrates that if a society fails to provide meaning, it becomes a moral duty to impose one’s will and create a personal set of values. In this regard, and despite his youth and naivety, the boy is the closest thing to the Nietzschean “Superman”. He was able to create, defend and retain a personal notion of a higher “good” even if it contradicted his reality. There is no indication whether his bravery was able to survive the test of time since the novel does not end on a completely optimistic note. However, the boy’s fate is irrelevant. What matters is the refusal to yield to the call of nihilism.

In this thesis, the three novels function in harmony to explain the phenomenon of postmodern nihilism. They are approached as an overarching universe in which different characters deal with the same problem in different ways. Certainly, the issues that this research discusses have been written about extensively and all the selected works have been studied separately. However, few attempts have been made to examine them collectively or to interpret their seemingly dissimilar themes as manifestations of the same issue. This study compiles multiple analyses and utilizes different interpretations to study a larger theme, namely the loss of traditional values in contemporary American culture. Additionally, the issues of nihilism and the loss of values are usually part of philosophical, social and sometimes theological discussions. This research attempts to bring those concerns to the literary realm with the

pretension that literature can provide an insight that the other disciplines could be enriched by.

It is important to acknowledge that this research does not pretend to provide all the necessary answers to the questions it posited. Attempting to apply the insights of fictional works to shed light on philosophical ideas that find expression in today's world is no simple undertaking, and this endeavor was faced with numerous limitations. The first is the need to restrict the literary analysis to three novels which prevented the introduction of other pertinent works. The thesis emerged from the observation of a social phenomenon that required fictional works that best illustrate it. This led to the reading of many novels that had the potential of serving as case studies. Being limited to only three offered more room for a deeper analysis and created a sense of cohesion by dedicating a complete chapter for each work. However, there are many other postmodern novels that could have illustrated the loss of traditional values and introduced other aspects of nihilism. For instance, Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) could have demonstrated the moral deterioration of the money-crazed capitalist elite, which is another dimension to the question of moral nihilism discussed in chapter four. Another major issue encountered during the first stages of research was the lack of pertinent data. Although there are enough articles that discuss the question of nihilism in the case study novels, very few works deal directly with the topic under examination. The proposition that these novels demonstrate the loss of traditional values in American society is relatively new, and pre-existing research was scarce. This fact initiated the difficult task of finding relevant elements in books and articles that appeared to be unrelated to each other,

which may give the impression that the thesis is sometimes fragmented, as it is an assembly of numerous studies and analyses linked together. Furthermore, it is conceivable that this study may appear overly theoretical. Indeed, the issues of nihilism and the loss of values have concrete implications that could have been addressed in a more practical manner. For instance, statistics about the propagation of nihilistic sentiments or interviews of people who share the characters' concerns (existential emptiness, alienation...) could have added to the credibility of this work. Nevertheless, this thesis remains primarily a literary analysis. An excessive focus on the social aspect of nihilism could have deviated the work from its primary objective. Still, future research on this issue might, for example, study the effects that the figure of Tyler Durden had on the readers (and viewers) of *Fight Club*. The final limitation is the cultural milieu in which this research was conducted. Nihilism is inherently atheistic and some of its aspects can be perceived as morally and culturally unacceptable. This made it difficult to navigate questions that would hurt the sensibility of readers. Yet, some of those elements were tentatively discussed through the use of euphemisms and reformulations. Clearly, this work has hardly brushed the surface of the subject of nihilism, and the topic of the abandonment and recovery of governing values still holds many questions that are yet to be answered.

The issue of nihilism remains a critical topic, and the contemporary world is still keen on denigrating old values under the guise of progress. It also fails to replace them with a solid foundation to restore the sanctity of life. The confusion that ensues is inevitable and it is only quenched by a busy life of empty hedonism. This process is not new in history, and literature has always been the best interpreter of social

phenomena. Before the dizzying effects of media depicted by Don DeLillo, the identity-sapping consumerism described by Palahniuk, and the immorality of individualism discussed by McCarthy, H.P Lovecraft already perceived the tell-tale signs of a culture that was heading towards nihilism by refuting its defining values. In his 1926 short story, *The Silver Key*, he eloquently described the process saying:

Warped and bigoted with preconceived illusions of justice, freedom, and consistency, they cast off the old lore and the old ways with the old beliefs; nor ever stopped to think that that lore and those ways were the sole makers of their present thoughts and judgments, and the sole guides and standards in a meaningless universe without fixed aims or stable points of reference. (Lovecraft 137-138)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. WORKS OF FICTION:

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale (Digital Copy)*. Titivillus, 1987.

Barth, John. *The Floating Opera Revised Edition*. New York: A Bantam Book/Published by arrangement with Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Collected Fictions translated by Andrew Hurley*. New York: Viking Press: Penguin Books, 1998.

DeLillo, Don. *Underworld*. New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1997.

—. *White Noise*. New York: Penguin Group, 1999.

Harris, Thomas. *Hannibal*. New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2000.

Lovecraft, Howard Philips. *Selected Stories*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2018.

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.

Palahniuk, Chuck. *Fight Club*. London: Random House Vintage, 2003.

Pynchon, Thomas. *Vineland*. London: Minerva, 1997.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. London: Methuen and Co., 1899.

Turgenev, Ivan S. *Fathers and Sons Translated by C. J. Hogarth*. London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd. , 1921.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Cat's Cradle*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1963.

—. *Breakfast for Champions*. New York: Random House Publishing Group, 1999.

II. WORKS OF CRITICISM AND PHILOSOPHY:

Adorno, Theodor Translated by Dennis Redmond. *Negative Dialectics*. Frankfurt, Germany: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970.

Akşehir, Mahinur. "Remaining Men Together: A Critique of Modern Experience in Palahniuk's Fight Club." *Violence in the Contemporary World: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Oxford, UK: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2014.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser and Ann Arbor*. Michigan: Michigan Press, 1994.

Boxall, Peter. "DeLillo and media culture." *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo, edited By John N. Duvall*. UK: Cambridge University Press, n.d. 2008.

Brassier, Ray. *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*. UK: Palgrave McMillan, 2007.

Brooks, John Allan. *Rewriting the Human: Death Anxiety and Posthuman Vision in Literature Since 1945*. University of South Carolina, 2013.

- Bull, Jeffrey Steven. *Trying Nothing: Appraisals of Nihilism in American Fiction of the 1970's (PhD Thesis)*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto, 1997.
- Cant, John. *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*. New York: Taylor and Francis, 2008.
- Cantor, Paul A. "'Adolf, We Hardly Knew You.'" Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Don DeLillo's White Noise*. Pennsylvania: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003.
- Conroy, Mark. "From Tombstone to Tabloid: Authority Figured in White Noise." Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Don DeLillo's White Noise*. Pennsylvania: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003.
- Cooper, Barry. "Nihilism and Technology." *Nietzsche and the Rhetoric of Nihilism: Essays on Interpretation, Language and Politics*. Ottawa, Canada: Carleton University Press, 1989. 165-183.
- Cooper, Lydia R. *Cormac McCarthy: A complexity theory of literature*. UK: Manchester University Press, 2021.
- Crosby, Donald A. *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism*. Albany, USA: State University of New York Press, 1988.
- Davies, Christopher. *"Carrying the Fire": Cormac McCarthy's Moral Philosophy (Thesis)*. Rhodes University, 2011.
- Duvall, John N. "The (Super) Marketplace of Images: Television as Unmediated Mediation in DeLillo's White Noise." Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Modern*

- Critical Interpretations: Don DeLillo's White Noise*. Pennsylvania: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Missouri: YOG eBooks by Roger L Cole, 2014.
- Frow, John. "The Last Things Before the Last: Notes on White Noise." Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Don DeLillo's White Noise*. Pennsylvania: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003.
- Frye, Steven. *Understanding Contemporary American Literature: Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. Ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli. The University of South Carolina Press, 2009.
- Geef, Dennis. *Late Capitalism and its Fictitious Future(s) the Postmodern, Science Fiction, and the Contemporary Dystopia (Thesis)*. Germany: Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms University of Bonn, 2015.
- Giles, James R. "Violence, Spaces, and a Fragmenting Consciousness in Fight Club." Collado-Rodríguez, Francisco (Ed.). *Bloomsbury Studies in Contemporary North American Fiction. Chuck Palahniuk: Fight Club, Invisible Monsters, Choke*. London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Gwinner, Donovan. "'Everything uncoupled from its shoring': Quandaries of Epistemology and Ethics in The Road." *Continuum Studies in Contemporary North American Fiction. Cormac McCarthy: All The Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road*. Ed. Sara L. Spurgeon. Leicester: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011.

- Helyer, Ruth. "DeLillo and masculinity." *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, edited By John N. Duvall. UK: Cambridge University Press, n.d. 2008.
- Hollinger, David. "The Enlightenment and the Genealogy of Cultural Conflict in the United States." *What's Left of Enlightenment? A Postmodern Question*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001. 7-18.
- Jacobsen, Kjersti. *Beyond the Body: A Representation of Gender in Fight Club* (Thesis). Norway: University of Oslo, 2013.
- Kant, Immanuel. *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment? Translated by Ted Humphrey*. Indiana: Hacket Publishing, 1992.
- Kight, Peter. "DeLillo, postmodernism, postmodernity." *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, edited by John N. Duvall. UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Kollin, Susan. "'Barren, silent, godless': Ecodisaster and the Post-abundant Landscape in The Road." *Continuum Studies in Contemporary North American Fiction. Cormac McCarthy: All The Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road*. Ed. Sara L. Spurgeon. Leicester,: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011.
- Kvale, Steinar. "Postmodern Psychology: A Contradiction in Terms?" *Psychology and Postmodernism*. London: SAGE Publications, 1992.
- Lavine, T. Z. *From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophic Quest*. USA: Bantam Books, 1984.

Le Clair, Tom. "Closing the Loop: White Noise." Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Critical Interpretations: Don DeLillo's White Noise*. Pennsylvania: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003.

Lentricchia, Frank. "Tales of the Electronic Tribe." Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Don DeLillo's White Noise*. Pennsylvania: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003.

Magnus, Bernd and Kathleen M. Higgins. *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Maltby, Paul. "The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo." Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Don DeLillo's White Noise*. Pennsylvania: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003.

Mendieta, Eduardo. "The Avatars of Masculinity: How Not to be a Man." Collado-Rodriguez, Francisco (Ed.). *Bloomsbury Studies in Contemporary North American Fiction. Chuck Palahniuk: Fight Club, Invisible Monster, Choke*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Moon, Shane Pheonix. *The Search for Meaning and Morality in the Works of Cormac McCarthy* (Thesis). Ohio, USA: Wright State University, 2015.

M'Rabty, Rachid. *Nihilism, Self-Destruction and the (Im)Possibility of Escape in Contemporary Transgressive Fictions (PhD Thesis)*. Manchester, UK: Manchester Metropolitan University, 2019.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Dawn of Day*. Trans. John McFarland Kennedy.

New York: Published online by Project Gutenberg. Originally published by
The MacMillan Company, 1911. eBook.

—. *The Will to Power*. Translated by Walker Kaufmann and R.J Hollingdale . New
York: Random House: Vintage Books Editions, 1967.

Olster, Stacey. "White Noise." *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, edited By
John N. Duvall. UK: Cambridge University Press, n.d. 2008.

Peterson, Jordan B. *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. Canada: Allen Lane
(Penguin Random House Group), 2018.

—. *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life*. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2021.

Phillips, Dana. "'He ought not have done it': McCarthy and Apocalypse." *Continuum
Studies in Contemporary North American Fiction*. *Cormac McCarthy: All The
Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road*. Ed. Sara L. Spurgeon.
Leicester: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011.

Repphun, Eric. "Every Story is a Ghost: Chuck Palahniuk and the Reenchantment of
Suffering." *Religion and the Body: Modern Science and the Construction of
Religious Meaning*. Ed. David and Norris, Rebecca S. Cave. Leiden,
Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 2011.

Saltzman, Arthur M. "The Figure in the Static: White Noise." Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's
Modern Critical Interpretations: Don DeLillo's White Noise*. Pennsylvania:
Chelsea House Publishers, 2003.

Slocombe, Will. *Postmodern Nihilism: Theory and Literature*. Aberystwyth, Wales:

Routledge, 2006.

Stark, Cynthia. "There's Something about Marla: Fight Club and the Engendering of

Self-Respect." *Fight Club* Wartenberg, Thomas E. (Ed.). Utah, USA: Taylor &

Francis Group, 2011.

Vickroy, Laurie. "Body Contact: Acting Out is the Best Defense in Fight Club."

Bloomsbury Studies in Contemporary North American Fiction: Chuck

Palahniuk: Fight Club, Invisible Monsters, Choke. Ed. Francisco Collado-

Rodríguez. London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Weinstein, Arnold. "Don DeLillo: Rendering the Words of the Tribe." Bloom, Harold.

Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Don DeLillo's White Noise.

Pennsylvania: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003.

Wenley, Stephen. *Existential Thoughts in American Psycho and Fight Club (Thesis)*.

New Zealand: Victoria University of Wellington, 2011.

Wilcox, Leonard. "Baudrillard, DeLillo's White Noise, and the End of Heroic

Narrative." Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Critical Interpretations: Don DeLillo's*

White Noise. Pennsylvania: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003.

Woodward, Ashley. *Nihilism in Postmodernity: Lyotard, Baudrillard, Vattimo*.

Colorado: The Davies Group Publishers, 2009.

III. ARTICLES:

Bennett, Robert. "The Death of Sisyphus: Existentialist Literature and the Cultural Logic of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*." *Stirring Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature* Vol. 2 No. 2 (2005): 65-80.

Changizi, Parisa. "The Human, Nonhuman, Inhuman in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Ostrava Journal of English Philosophy* Vol. 14 No. 2 (2022): 21-33.

Choi, Jaemin. "Death, Noise, and (Un)plotting in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*." *Institute of American Studies* (2015): 111-128.

Cooper, Lydia R. "Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as Apocalyptic Grail Narrative." *Studies in the Novel* Vol. 43 No. 2 (2011): 218-236.

Dominy, Jordan J. "Cannibalism, Consumerism, and Profanation: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the End of Capitalism." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* Vol. 13 (2015): 143-158.

Dryzhakova, Elena. "Dostoevsky, Chernyshevsky, and the Rejection of Nihilism." *Oxford Slavonic Papers* Vol.13 (1980): 58-79.

Elmore, Rick and Elmore, Jonathan. "'You can stay here with your papa and die or you can go with me': The Ethical Imperative of *The Road*." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* Vol.16 No. 2 (2018): 133-148.

Gallivan, Euan. "Compassionate McCarthy? *The Road* and Schopenhauerian Ethics." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* Vol. 6 (2008): 98–106.

- Gold, Steven N. "Fight Club: A Depiction of Contemporary Society as Dissociogenic." *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation* Vol. 5 (2004): 13-34.
- Hartt, Brian. "Is That What a Man Looks Like? Nihilistic Tautologies and the Splitting of Self in Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club." *TCNJ Journal of Student Scholarship* Vol. 16 (2014).
- Hock Soon Ng, Andrew. "Muscular Existentialism in Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club." *Stirring Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature* Vol. 2 No. 2 (2005): 116-138.
- Ibarrola-Armendariz, Aitor. "Cormac McCarthy's The Road: Rewriting the Myth of the American West." *European Journal of American Studies* Vol. 6 No. 3 (special issue: Postfrontier Writing) (2011): 133-156.
- Joyce, Stephen. "The Double Death of Humanity in Cormac McCarthy's The Road." *Transatlantica: Revue d'études américaines* Vol. 2 (2016): 1-16.
- Jung, Narie. "Individualism in Cormac McCarthy's The Road: The Highway to Unsustainability." *Cultura: International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology* Vol. 20 No.1 (2023): 95-106.
- Kavadlo, Jesse. "The Fiction of Self-Destruction: Chuck Palahniuk, Closet Moralist." *Stirring Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature* Vol. 2 No. 2 (2005): 3-24.
- Kennet, Paul. "Fight Club and the Dangers of Oedipal Obsession." *Stirring Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature* Vol. 2 No. 2 (2005): 48-64.

- Kerakasis, Georginous and Lavilla de Lera, Jonathan. "Fight for Nothing: Fight Club and Nihilism in Capitalist Society." *Images vol. 31, No. 40* (2022): 149-160.
- Kunsa, Ashley. "'Masps of the World in Its Becoming': Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Journal of Modern Literature Vol. 33 No.1* (2009): 54-74.
- Laguarta Bueno, Carmen. "Trauma and Existentialism in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006)." *Nordic Journal of English Studies Vol. 18 No. 1* (2019).
- Landau, Iddo. "Foundationless Freedom and Meaninglessness of Life in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*." *Sartre Studies International Vol. 18 N. 1* (2012): 1-8.
- Lockwood, Renee D. "Cults, Consumerism and the Construction of Self: Exploring the Religious within *Fight Club*." *Journal of Contemporary Religion Vol. 23 No. 3* (2008): 321-335.
- Mathews, Peter. "Diagnosing Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*." *Stirring Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature Vol. 2 No. 2* (2005): 81-104.
- Mendieta, Eduardo. "Surviving American Culture: On Chuck Palahniuk." *Philosophy and Literature Vol. 29, No. 02* (2005): 394-408.
- Najjarzadeha, Sadegh. "Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: An Initial Postmodern Society Struggling with Fledgling Policies of Consumersim." *International Journal of English Literature and Culture Vol. 03 ISSN: 2360-7831* (2015): 269-276.

- O'Connor, Patrick Damien. "Anti-Matters: Mortal Ethics in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *European journal of American studies Vol. 12 No. 3 Special Issue (Cormac McCarthy Between Worlds)* (2017): 406-438.
- Pirnajmuddin, Hossein. "The ridiculous sublime in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*." *Journal of Language Studies Vol. 16 No. 1* (2016): 183-197.
- Sabouri, Hossein. "Postmodernism, Philosophy and Literature." *Journal of Philosophical Investigations Vol. 12, No. 24* (2018): 271-285.
- Snyder, Phillip A. "Hospitality in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal Vol. 6* (2008): 69-86.
- Soman, Namitha and Basil, Nikitha. "Deciphering Hannibal Lecter: Sociopath or Superhuman?" *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies (IJELR) Vol. 5 Issue 1* (2018): 54-59.
- Storey, David. "Nihilism, Nature and the Collapse of the Cosmos." *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy, vol. 7, no. 2* (2011): 6-25.
- Taylor, Aaron. "A Cannibal's Sermon: Hannibal Lecter, Sympathetic Villainy and Moral Revaluation." *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image Vol. 4* (2014): 184-208.
- Vattimo, Gianni. "Nihilism as Emancipation." Translated by Lorenzo Chiesa. *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy, vol. 5, no. 1* (2009): 20-23.

Veit, Walter. "Existential Nihilism: The Only Really Serious Philosophical Problem."

Journal of Camus Studies (2018): 211-232.

Walsh, Kelly S. "Figures of Violence in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*: "No Remedy

for Evil but Only for the Image of It"." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural*

Studies Vol. 42 No. 2 (2016): 221-243.

Wielenberg, Erik J. "God, Morality, and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*."

Cormac McCarthy Journal Vol. 8 No. 1 (2010): 1-19.

Wilhelm, Randall S. "'Golden chalice, good to house a God': Still Life in *The Road*."

The Cormac McCarthy Journal Vol. 6 (2008): 129-146.

I. WEBLIOGRAPHY:

Gates, Luis Henry. n.d. <[https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Man-Who-Lived-](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Man-Who-Lived-Underground)

[Underground](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Man-Who-Lived-Underground)>.

Hendricks, Scotty. "'God is dead': What Nietzsche really meant." 22 January 2022.

bigthink.com. <<https://bigthink.com/thinking/what-nietzsche-really-meant-by-god-is-dead/>>.

McGinn, Colin. "Epistemic Nihilism." 10 December 2020. *Colinmcginn.com*. 24

August 2025. <<https://www.colinmcginn.net/epistemic-nihilism/>>.

- Moberger, Victor. "The Truth about Objective Truths." October/November 2022. *Free Inquiry*. 23 August 2025. <<https://secularhumanism.org/2022/10/the-truth-about-objective-truths/>>.
- Pratt, Alan. "Nihilism." n.d. *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (IEP)*. 15 July 2023. <<https://iep.utm.edu/nihilism/>>.
- Shaver, Robert. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 4 November 2002. 23 August 2025. <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/egoism/#RatiEgoi>>.
- Tame, Chris R. "Cultural Notes 001, Ernest Hemingway and the Failure of Nihilism." 1983. *libertarianism.uk*. 01 2025. <<https://libertarianism.uk/2004/01/03/cultural-notes-001-ernest-hemingway-and-the-failure-of-nihilism-1983-by-dr-chris-r-tame/>>.