

**Blackening the Blind Eye:
20th Century American Masculinity and Violence**

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Violence is not merely killing another. It is violence when we use a sharp word, when we make a gesture to brush away a person, when we obey because there is fear. So violence isn't merely organized butchery in the name of God, in the name of society or country.

Violence is much more subtle, much deeper, and we are inquiring into the very depths of violence.

-Jiddu Krishnamurt, 1895-1986

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Chapter 1: “Carved Out of Wood”: America’s Fascination with Male Identity

American literature has sought to define and redefine itself ever since the eighteenth century. In such regeneration there come stories that embrace the American mentality so subtly, so powerfully that we unconsciously integrate them into our lives. Chuck Palahniuk’s 1996 novel *Fight Club* revolves around a group of men who fight one another in protest against how soft America has become. As the narrator and his alter-ego, Tyler Durden, describe America’s “New Great Depression,” we meet a group of men who are searching for a new way to save themselves from losing their male identities. These men protest with their fists the softening American male identity in a way that isn’t warped by the “hug-it-out” mentality:

Fight club isn't about words. You see a guy come to fight club for the first time, and his ass is a loaf of white bread. You see this same guy here six months later, and he looks carved out of wood. There's grunting and noise at fight club like at the gym, but fight club isn't about looking good. There's hysterical shouting in tongues like at church, and when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved. (Palahniuk 42-43)

With each jaw fracture, bruised eye, and bloodied spit, the fighters feel as if they are regaining not only what makes them American, but what makes them carved out of wood, that is, what makes them men.

The base acts of violence perfected in these Palahniuk’s fight clubs should give American readers some pause. Scarily enough, they don’t. The violence is not repugnant, it is not frightening. In fact, it is kind of cool, kind of sexy, kind of –American. The danger of Brad Pitt’s portrayal of Palahniuk’s hard-edged, muscle-fueled rage doesn’t

turn us away from the safety or sense of self that it seems to provide him. Instead of feeling alienated by less than socially-redeemable tactics, something inside us, the American popular readers, sympathizes with these fighters. Countless American protagonists, from *The Wild, Wild West*'s Jim West to *Die Hard*'s John McClane, thumb their noses at polite, civilized society, and the American reader frequently cheers them on. West's bullet-slinging or McClane's disregard of terrorist life doesn't stall our support of them, because they are fighting for family, country, identity, or a combination of the three. Raw attraction to Durden, McClane, or West, rather than thought about their motives, is nearly a gut reaction to us. Isn't American identity based in such revolutionary actions? Don't we like our men big, bad, and ready to bruise? That attraction to a violent American male identity makes male-perpetrated violence acceptable and attractive to a viewing audience, so much so that we come to expect and respect it without ever truly examining the effects of such a notion of heroic male violence.

This American comfort with violent male heroes is not contained only within contemporary literature. The mixing of violence and male identity began the moment that the literature of this nation received the brand "American." In 1981, Nina Baym wrote "Melodramas of Beset Manhood," in which she argues that the male has become the sole focus of American literature because critics have read male identity so deeply into texts. She argues that much of the literature places the protagonist's journey in a "sexual definition that has melodramatic, misogynist implications" (Baym "Melodramas" 133). According to Baym, American literature is fixated on the idea that the protagonist must separate himself from society at large and define himself as *himself*. Protagonists are

expected to be strong, successful, fearless, and have a physical and mental place that is exclusively theirs. The most essential part of American identity “comes to reside in its unsettled wilderness and the opportunities that such a wilderness offers to the individual as the medium on which he may inscribe, unhindered, his own destiny and his own nature” (Baym “Melodramas” 132). While Baym explores the rejection of society, she fails to analyze the violence which is essential to that process. While it may not be the cement-floored, bare-knuckled violence of Palahniuk, American male identity, as expressed in literature, still relies on violence.

Whether it is Owen Wister’s sun-bleached duel between Trampas and the Virginian or the Ralph Ellison’s Liberty Paint beat-down, defining moments for American protagonists revolve around violent action. While there are plenty of questions surrounding the idea of violence, no question comes close to focusing on the real effects of this violence. It does not matter if the violence is physical or emotional, explicit or implied, the destructive effects are masked by motives, goals, or salvations that are considered justifiable. Sure, Trampas is gunned down in cold blood, and yes, Ellison’s character beats an old man senseless, but they do so to further a good cause. Yet, in the post-world-war, atomic age of genocide, despotism, and revolution, the impacts of such metaphors and devices become all the more real.

Hannah Arendt didn’t invent the concept of violence, but she attempts to fully understand it as a phenomenon. In *On Violence*, Arendt asserts that violence is accepted in society because “no one questions or examines what is obvious to all” (Arendt 8). She quickly points out that violence has ceased to become something that happens, and that it is now a tool. Man is a creature that believes he can achieve, through the utilization of

violence, higher status, power, and ultimately an identity separate from those over whom he exerts power. Arendt explains that violence is essentially “man recreating himself” because, as Marx noted, through violent actions, even the most wretched of the earth can become men (Arendt 12). Baym reminds us that the true American male identity is a sense of maleness “divorced from specific social circumstances” and that the men entering into this divergence of self from society are promised a “new land, untrammelled by history and social accident,” a place where they will be able “to achieve complete self-definition” (“Melodramas” 71). Thus, two things become abundantly clear. One, in order to be a real *American* man, a protagonist must reject the society that is “entrapping” him. Two, violence is an acceptable way for a man to divorce himself from society. The American male needs to dirty his own hands and violently manifest his resistance in order to fully reach his American male identity.

No one can deny the obvious violence of two men pummeling each other under the banner of a fight club. But what of the storytelling contests in *The Virginian* or the constant demoralization of race traitors in *Invisible Man*? Are these violent actions? Do these fit into the same formula of resistance American protagonists require and we crave? While emotional or linguistic domination of a subject does not physically eliminate them as a person (in truth there is no bodily harm), damage is done. Rhetoric, duels, preaching, hangings, debates, witty repartee, fights, drownings, protests—each and every one of these situations in literature has the same outcome: someone wins, and someone loses. These are the verbal and emotional situations that we view as non-violent or relatively safe for protagonists to participate in. If we are to believe Baym (and there is no reason we should not) when she tells us that American literature is a “nationalistic

enterprise” that runs toward claiming a uniquely American identity, then a collective reassessment of the path of the American protagonist becomes necessary (Baym “Melodramas” 126). While the poetics of the male identity may make readers go starry-eyed, the reality is more stomach-turning. Moving towards one’s destiny (read: American male identity) has become darkly violent, and thus deeply problematic. Our biggest qualm about questioning violence is that if we look to expand the definition of violence beyond something exclusively physical, we fear losing the sexy, desirable myth. If we continue discussing these violent tendencies as romantic and defensible, our protagonist keeps his journey and we keep our literature. The American readers’ blind spot to violence comes because we refuse to give up our heroes.

For too long the American male protagonist has been allowed to operate without appropriate questioning of the violence inherent in his actions. This paper will look to question just that. Critics such as Richard Slotkin have pointed out that the American fascination with violence began in the frontier and has continued to steadily develop¹. Because of this, I will start with one of the most canonical texts of the American West, Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*. Moving up through the years, I will then integrate the question of race into that of violence with Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. The *Virginian* presents us with a timeless, nameless hero who is thought to be the embodiment of both maleness and, I argue, acceptable violence. Ellison’s African-American protagonist brings us to a post-war, racially mixed United States that is beginning to question violence and learning how to justify and categorize its uses. However, in much of the

¹ In this paper I will be focusing intently on violence in American literature and its effects on current understanding and negotiation of American male identity. See Slotkin for a more historical analysis of violence as a creation force in America.

current body of criticism, violence has been overlooked or accepted as necessary to the journey of a protagonist to “reside in [the] unsettled wilderness” (Baym “Melodramas” 132). Baym closes “Melodramas” by admitting that American literature has “arrived at a place where Americanness has vanished into the depths of what is alleged to be the universal male psyche” (139); I refuse to think the conversation should end there.

Violence has become such an expected part of the American male protagonist’s journey that violence itself is no longer registering with us as readers. Plenty of American male protagonists have fascinated us and achieved their own identity, but now it is time to ask the question: just how much blood can American protagonists spill before we are ready to stop courting and start questioning?

Chapter 2: “A Knife in My Sleep...”: Hidden Violence and Male Identity in *The Virginian*

American men are hearty and strong-willed; there isn't anywhere our boys can't survive. While it seems trite, such a sentiment has always surrounded the American male when he sets out to uncharted lands. As stated by Baym, American literature focuses not on what is truly “the best literature,” but more often what is the “most American” (“Melodramas” 65). The achievement of American male identity is most often seen in the fictional American West. The West was the embodiment of individualism. A wild, untamed place where civilization was upended, the American West was “simply, western, a thing unto itself” (Baym “Old West” 827). Nothing could be more advantageous to the idea of identity than an area unmarked by society. The West was *the* place where men could discover the identity Baym explains they yearn for. The untamed, natural setting gave American male identity a place to be realized. American literature had for too long dreamed of a place so untamed and the type of man strong enough to tame it. At the turn of the century, Owen Wister took up the pen in order to satisfy this desire to define and explore by inspiring a nation of men to delve deep into themselves and struggle to achieve that all-consuming goal of identity, strength, and success.

Lee Clark Mitchell's critical work “‘When You Call Me That...’: Tall Talk and Male Hegemony in *The Virginian*” seeks to dispel the rumors that Wister's American hero was a violent, “mysterious loner” on a quest to win at any cost (66). According to Mitchell, Wister's *The Virginian* is single-handedly “responsible all by itself for the emergence of the soft-spoken, sure-shooting cowboy hero” (66). A story about the slow, destructive encroachment of civilization on the true heart of America—the wild, untamed

West—*The Virginian* written in 1902, gives American men what they always needed: a hero who cannot fail. The full effect of this childlike awe can be felt through the eyes of the unnamed narrator, who often refers to the character of the Virginian as the “tall cow-puncher” (Wister 26). It is with this hero worship that the dangers of accepting the violence of *The Virginian* become real. Acts of violence are dismissed and accepted as inconsequential; they are never questioned. Mitchell works through the story, explaining that the novel is not a reflection of a “time of supposedly staunch individualism and a place where problems were physically resolved,” but is instead Wister attempting to show wordplay and oration as better than physical violence. Mitchell falls into the practice of accepting violence, aggression, and domination as natural and necessary. While there are scenes of violence depicted in the Western epic, Mitchell argues that they are overshadowed by the Virginian’s ability to charm or talk his way out of anything. The problem here is that he assumes Wister—as Baym so nicely puts it—“epitomizes the tensions in our culture,” that “the male author produces his melodramatic testimony to our culture’s essence” (“Melodramas” 70). Mitchell reads Wister’s story as a reflection of what truly is happening in American men, instead of the romantic notion Wister is trying to sell. Wister is creating a myth and attempting to make it a reality for American men. American literature had become the last refuge of the perfect American man. Within the pages of *The Virginian*, a male protagonist is allowed to become the man that American readers dream of, without having to worry about his violent tendencies.

To dispel the idea of acceptable violence proposed by such we must realize the Virginian’s requires that someone unwillingly submit to his authority. In order to effectively use violence to reach his identity, there must be a struggle, and the victim of

the Virginian must submit. The Virginian's true nature becomes most obvious when he is interacting in a one-on-one setting with another character. He uses his ability to orate and simply imply violence as a way to establish his dominance and identity. Early in the novel, the reader is treated to an example of the man's ability to dominate others when the Virginian convinces an Eastern drummer to sleep elsewhere because of violent dreams that leave him "talkin' and tossin', or what not" (Wister 39). When the drummer presses a bit further, the Virginian instructs him not to "let your arm or your laig touch me if I go to jumpin' around. I'm dreamin' of Indians when I do that. And if anything touches me then, I'm liable to grab my knife right in my sleep" (Wister 39). When Mitchell reads this scene, he assumes Wister is "devoted to verbal flourishes, not pistol spins" while, in truth, the subtext is devoted exclusively to violence (67). It isn't mastery of language that convinces the drummer to give up his bed, but more fear of having a knife plunged into his body for a mere accident in the middle of the night. Even before the two officially interact Wister has the Virginian set his sights on "his victim," meaning the drummer-as-bedmate (26). While the drummer may have successfully resisted, at first, he is eventually cowed into submission. Being a true man in this scene is not simply talking a gentleman in circles, but implying that if he is going to hold his claim on the space the protagonist wants to occupy alone, he is very literally risking life and limb.

The necessity of violence is so ingrained that it cannot even be overcome by a deep, emotional attachment. The most personal relationship the Virginian has is with Steve, his best friend. However, Steve is involved in a cattle rustling operation, caught, condemned to death, and the Virginian is part of the execution posse. Before Steve's execution, the Virginian silences all questions from the narrator and others because they

have, “no call to blame me for the customs of the country. You leave other folks' cattle alone, or you take the consequences” (Wister 297). However, after the death of Steve, the Virginian reads a note addressing him as Jeff, Steve’s personal name for him:

He was standing beside me quite motionless; and then he put out his hand and took the paper, and stood still, looking at the words. [...] He slowly folded the message from the dead, brought by the dead, and rolled it in the coat behind his saddle. For a half-minute he stood leaning his forehead down against the saddle. (Wister 303-304)

Here, Steve *needs* to die. He dies because the law of the West deems that his fate, unchangeable by any man. However, Steve’s death allows the Virginian to “sob” (Wister 289). Killing Steve furthers the Virginian’s discovery of male identity. The emotional response shows that the violent action is *not* a natural and acceptable human need. It shows that even American protagonists can and do value life and deep emotional attachments. Wister attempts to give the reader comfort in the fact that the decisions to violence are hard for the man, but in all reality the American mentality of violence as necessary and acceptable is simply enforced, and remorse is paid no more than lip service.

The single largest point of implicit and “acceptable” violence occurs when another cowhand, Trampas, and the Virginian meet. Early in the novel, the moment that gives Mitchell’s article its name sets the standard of interaction between the protagonist and Trampas, now antagonist. Whereas the tall, lean protagonist is repeatedly called a “gentleman,” Trampas is painted as vulgar, rude, and unable to hold his tongue. As the two enter into a card game, it becomes quite obvious that it will be anything but a

friendly match. We are informed that Trampas “don’t enjoy losing to strangers” and that he “contrived to make those words a personal taunt” (Wister 32-33). As the match progresses, the time comes for the Virginian to bet, and he simply takes his time. As he plans his next move:

Trampas spoke. “Your bet, you son-of-a---.” The Virginian’s pistol came out, and his hand lay on the table, holding it unaimed. And with a voice as gentle as ever, the voice that sounded almost like a caress, but drawling a very little more than usual, so that there was almost a space between each word, he issued his orders to the man Trampas:— “When you call me that, *smile!*” (Wister 33)

Again, Mitchell argues that this linguistic exchange is nothing more than the Virginian choosing to sling words instead of bullets. While the verbal assault itself doesn’t fully embody the violence needed to reach the American male identity he craves, the threat of it gives it power. The narrator breaks the fourth wall to tell the reader that, “Yes, the voice was gentle. But in my ears it seemed as if somewhere the bell of death was ringing” (Wister 33). Even the enraptured fan sees that it is not the verbal flourish that makes this warning dangerous or the Virginian a man of presence; it is the implied violence behind the language. Nothing about the exchange of words alone points to power; rather, it is the implication that Trampas is now betting with his life that gives the words weight. The idealistic, American view of violence here leads a reader to assume that because there is no immediate physical violence, the Virginian must not be looking to brutalize the man he sees as his opponent, when in fact nothing could be more obvious.

The duel itself, when it actually occurs roughly three hundred pages after the first exchange, is not all that spectacular. Occupying about five lines in the entire novel, the scene is only impressive because of the preceding prose. There is much hemming and hawing from him, his lover, and the society around him about the Virginian's choice to duel. It doesn't seem as if the man will ever do anything other than duel, but Wister uses his prose to try to make the Virginian look reluctant by telling Molly that he tried his best to avoid the duel but cannot. Still, Molly's (and thus society's) submission to an accepting violence becomes obvious when the Virginian responds to the effects of his kill-shot, "I expect that's all [...] I told her it would not be me" (Wister 344-345). Even after trying his best to avoid causing death, his reaction to Trampas' death is anything but sad. The careless and matter-of-fact way the Virginian experiences the death of a man, the man he needs to dominate in order to prove his worthiness of the American male identity, speaks volumes. He has taken the life of a man who has haunted and harassed him but he simply sees it as a necessity, a job to be done. Wister has this man hand out a death sentence with no more emotion than he would use to rein a horse or remove his boots to sleep.

Such a blasé acceptance of violence here opens the door for American rationalization and justification. Trampas was a man who was uncouth and dangerous to the Virginian in the sense that he was also a man of great presence and power. Yet, every act of aggression and violence is perpetrated by the supposed gentlemanly hero. The threats of death and pistols are brought to the table only by the Virginian; he fires the first shot in the duel; at the conclusion of a tall tale he tells the men, "Frawgs are dead Trampas, and so are you" (Wister 152). Mitchell may claim that there is something

romantic and non-violent in the man because he tries to dominate the world using his language and that he only uses actual, physical violence as a last resort, but Mitchell is in denial. Trampas was an obstacle to the Virginian's ability to find his happiness in the West, to identify himself without society or anyone else having their say; thus, he was removed. There should not be anything romantic about the death and domination of a man simply for the achievement of this dreamy American identity. The nod to regret simply serves to reinforce the idea that, though it is "regrettable," unwilling submission and the violence used to ensure it are necessary. While there is not an active denial of violence in *The Virginian*, the implicit acceptance and romanticization of it tells the public that yes, power does blossom from the barrel of a gun and that the value of ideal American-maleness means everyone is a target.

Of course, not all characters dominated linguistically by the Virginian end up on the receiving end of a bullet; some are simply pushed to the point of submission. The female character Miss Molly Stark Wood begins as something of an obstacle for the southern cow-puncher. Slowly, she is pulled into his struggle for male identity so she can try to avoid being destroyed by it. When Wister first introduces Molly, the chapter is titled, "The Sincere Spinster," and she is described as "an unusual young lady for two reasons" (Wister 75). These two reasons are her heritage and—more importantly—her character. She is understood to be prideful and intelligent, unafraid of any challenge, and she looks to the West to find new adventure and *her* own identity. These two things are, of course, two of the ideals outlined in the achievement of the American male identity laid forth by Baym. Molly becomes just as Trampas was, a competing identity for the Virginian.

As the relationship with the Virginian begins, Molly argues with him about intellectual pursuits and engages in simple verbal contests, but she must submit to him. When the two first speak, the text is littered with words such as “battle,” “hit,” “flustered,” “agitation,” and “punishment” (Wister 102-103). Molly is here established as a woman who is the Virginian’s equal in conversation and repartee, someone who is willing and able to match him word for word. However, in every conflict, verbal or otherwise, there must be a loser, and Wister quickly makes it clear who it *must* be. As the couple discusses the events of a previous evening, Molly attempts to catch the Virginian in a moral quandary and prove him ungentlemanly. However, she fails, and he retorts with a simple statement which is nevertheless effective; “It was his second broadside. It left her badly crippled. She was silent” (Wister 104). As the Virginian leaves after paying this impromptu visit, Molly “lingered a moment, then made some steps toward he gate, from which he could still be seen”; the scene is not a new one to contemporary readers: a woman wistfully watching something dangerous but exciting leave and yearning for its quick return. It is the typical romantic scene where she first realizes her deep attraction to a man who not a moment ago was crippling her. Within moments, Molly has gone from strong-willed woman to submissive object, simply waiting to be conquered.

While it may seem strange to modern readers to read so deeply into simple verbal sparring, Nina Baym underscores why the presence of a female presents such a problem. When assessing the validity of the American male identity in literature, Baym explains that the problem with males attempting to find themselves is not women themselves, but instead “the entrapping society and the promising landscape” (“Melodramas” 133). The ability to find an identity through societal rejection is impossible for women because

“both of society and nature are depicted in unmistakably feminine terms” (Baym “Melodramas” 133). This leads to the need of male protagonists to view women not as characters to be interacted with, but as obstacles to be overcome or tamed. Protagonists are left asking of anything with female qualities, “What can nature do for me[...]what can it give me?” (Baym “Melodramas” 135). Since American males feel the need to dominate, and domination, even when implied as violence, is inherent in society, Arendt’s conclusion about violence becomes applicable. Arendt explains that violence may be as simple as coercing another to your personal viewpoint, and within this context it becomes obvious that Molly is a thing to be brought into the fold, riches for the taking, or land for the conquering. The implicit submission to violence in these terms is never stated as being successfully resisted by the women who suffer it. They may fight initially, but it never lasts. When Molly rediscovers her defiant side in the tail end of the novel, she staunchly refuses to allow the Virginian to take part in the duel with Trampas:

“Can’t you see how it must be about a man?” he repeated. “I cannot,” she answered, in a voice that scarcely seemed her own. “If I ought to, I cannot. To shed blood in cold blood. When I heard about that last fall,—about the killing of those cattle thieves,—I kept saying to myself: ‘He had to do it. It was a public duty.’ And lying sleepless I got used to Wyoming being different from Vermont. But this”— she gave a shudder—“ when I think of to-morrow, of you and of—If you do this, there can be no to-morrow for you and me.” (Wister 341)

As Molly makes this impassioned speech, she makes it very clear that the violence the Virginian is going to perpetuate will never be worth the security and identity he argues

will come of it. She urges him to leave with her, to find a house far away in the mountains and live with her for the rest of their days without worrying about Trampas. Basically, Molly offers herself and the Virginian a revised version of American male identity. She gives him a chance to leave and find somewhere new to define himself in a context that *includes* her. Hers is a place where he simply concedes this land and his burgeoning identity to Trampas in order to uphold her safer, more feminized version of American male identity. Still, it is an unacceptable version to the Virginian and his sense of male identity. He asks her if she can understand that it has to be “about a man” and his pride, and honor, but she refuses to see that (Wister 341). Regardless of her refusals and her threat that his violent outburst will destroy what they have, he does it. After he kills Trampas and comes home unaffected by it but still alive “did her New England conscience battle to the end, and, in the end, capitulate to love” (Wister 345). Molly is no longer the verbal equal of the Virginian, her verbal flourishes no longer move him, and he has moved beyond fighting her as an obstacle because he has conquered her.

The Virginian views the “socializing and domesticating woman” as a threat to the identity that the West promised him if he were to prove himself (Baym “Melodramas” 73). With the landscape of the American male identity he has worked for on the horizon the Virginian needs only to pull the trigger, to complete the cycle of violence, in order to reach it. Molly’s vain protests are unheard by his ears because he cannot allow such an object (remember that all women are just things in American literature) to unsettle the land of his identity. He has verbally bested plenty before her, changed the world of tricky oration to implicit violence, and now simply has to force her back into the role in which she belongs: a tool for discovery of his American male identity, not of a part of it. Her

protests are supposed to be the voice of society and humanity, but she is not part of the society that grants the Virginian access to the dream he seeks.

Molly acts as the voice of reason in a world that views violence as acceptable. While Arendt does not explicitly state that all of society accepts violence, she does explain that “force and violence are likely to be successful techniques of social control and persuasion when they have wide popular support” (19). Thus, Molly is forced into silence because of the social acceptance of what *has* to happen to Trampas. The version of identity Molly offers the Virginian is a mirror image of the life he wants, the identity he craves, save one thing: there is no violence necessary. If he were to achieve her version of identity, he would be thought a coward, and his complete and socially acceptable male identity would be denied him. In order to receive the proper American male identity, he must appease the society that can grant it to him, and the sacrifice it requires is the blood of other men and the silence of the feminine.

The assumption that American male identity requires violence is a grandiose claim, but the Western proves that it has standing. Understanding violence as only physical domination allows Americans to turn a blind eye to lesser forms of violence. Lee Clark Mitchell ignores the problem when he attempts to separate the Virginian from the rough and ready version of the West the character inspired. Because there is this sense that American male identity is the ultimate prize, the American people are free to rationalize or make allowances for their male heroes. At face value, the Virginian is not a completely violent man, but he is required to dominate just about everyone he meets. Regardless if he is simply sparring verbally in order to get his own bed, proving to a school teacher that her place is below him, or firing two bullets through his nemesis, the

Virginian needs violent action to continue his journey. And we are left wondering: can American male identity be achieved without the instances of violence—implicit, lesser, or otherwise—or is violence too much a part of the identity called American?

The answer lies in the analysis provided by Arendt within her work. She explains that violence becomes both necessary and acceptable once a society becomes comfortable with it. If Mitchell is to be believed, *The Virginian* is a foundational hero in American literature. It is almost blasphemous to call him violent and dangerous when he obviously is a man of words not guns. What of the myth Mitchell sees as dominating the Western image these days? Why, if the text emphasizes wordplay over gunplay, did the high-noon showdown and rough and tumble West become so popular? It is explicitly because protagonists like the Virginian have been accepted and understood to be honorable. This is not to say that there is nothing redeemable about the character Wister created, but he is not unsoiled. The violent actions and romantic reasons behind them allow justifications to be made for any male to execute violence in the pursuit of his dreams. With allowances being made by critics and readers the American male identity becomes dominated by these paths of violence. Violence is, at this point, barely even questioned or categorized. Here Baym begins to see the exclusion of women from the dream because they are never the protagonists, but instead symbols of restraint. They must become tools to achieve the protagonist's identity because they must subsume their identities to the more powerful man. Complicity in believing this leads women to no longer be written as characters, but as embodiments, symbols, or trappings. The violent, iconic Western effectively denies the female and "weaker" men the chance to achieve their own identities or dreams.

The American male identity has become saturated with violence of all kinds because the American people have refused to question the methods and journeys of the protagonists achieving it. Because we do not question the methods of achieving the dream of identity, we end up justifying those methods for them. Gunpowder, blood, tears; nothing stains the hands of the American male as he reaches for his American male identity. The only problem here is that, for any non-white, non-male, the dream of identity becomes one long, violent American nightmare.

Chapter 3: "A Man of Substance": Self-Affirming Violence in *Invisible Man*

Meticulously crafted and strangely poetic, modern violence enraptures American audiences as if there were some deeper power within it, a power that, beyond its ability to fascinate, has the ability to create. Wister's *Virginian* is a shining example of this; however, his is not the only story. In the late nineteenth century, black male protagonists began to appear as a departure from the norm of the "white, middle-class, male, of Anglo-Saxon derivation" (Baym "Melodramas" 129). In his 1845 narrative, Frederick Douglass, one of the first free slaves to ever put his story in writing, spoke of how he found violence to be an affirming power of who he was and what he did; not a hindrance to his personal identity but uniquely part of it. In the turning point of his life, a fight with an abusive white man, Douglass wrote that the only people who can truly feel freed from the tomb of oppression were those who "repelled it by force" (74). His narrative could show that the violence necessary in achieving American male identity is colorblind. However, while the violence may be an option for the black man in America the path is a complicated by his racial identity.

The story for a black man in America is quite different than that of the stereotypical white cowboy. As we have seen in *The Virginian*, violence is one of the key elements in solidifying manhood in American society. The African-American male protagonist is left with the decision of what his violence is going to achieve: will he enter into a tempting communal African-American identity based on solidarity with his race, or will he struggle to discover his personal identity as an American man? Written in 1947, Ralph Ellison's protagonist in *Invisible Man* is a young man who is caught between these two identities: one marked by his race and one uniquely his own. American literature shows society pushing men towards violence, whether they are white or black. However,

Ellison illustrates that black protagonists must choose between violence that results in a surrender of their individual identity to a communal, race-specific one and violence that affirms an individual, American male identity.

Unlike the accepted violence of white protagonists, black male protagonists were in danger of being defined solely by their violence. In 1949 James Baldwin penned "Everybody's Protest Novel," to express his disgust with the way that authors were writing about black male protagonists and violence. From *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to *Native Son*, he argues that the failure comes in just accepting violence as part of American reality. He writes that "humanity is the burden and life of the African-American protagonist" and that "the failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, his dread, power" (Baldwin 23). Baldwin argues that black protagonists are forever being forced into violence because that is what Americans have come to expect. He takes issue with the protagonist who, "having come through this violence, we are told" has "redeemed his manhood" (Baldwin 22). He feels that blacks are trapped in a system in which they are expected to be violent and where violence can help them achieve a higher, more individual identity. While Baldwin never explicitly questions the gender of the protagonist, it is safe to assume that women, black or otherwise, are still excluded from the protagonist role. While the black male is not the characteristic white protagonist of the pre-World-War period, he seemingly holds true to the violent, sexist myth of the American male protagonist.

What Baldwin misses (and Ellison explores) are the two kinds of violence in the American system that are accessible to African-American men. Critic Morris Dickstein explains that "Ellison picked up where Baldwin faltered, insisting on the variety and

complexity of black life” (31). In his essay “Ralph Ellison, Race and American Culture,” Dickstein explores Ellison’s ability to create a protagonist who isn’t completely seduced by the common racial identity. The Invisible Man makes a decision and “rejects the 1950s mantra of maturity, the demand for affirmation, and reaches for something that makes him an outsider, even a pariah” (Dickstein 40). While it would seem sensible to stop here given the pattern of individuation established by the Virginian, the black man always has the specter of common racial identity lurking. While Dickstein’s analysis focuses mostly on how interactions with others and the ensuing isolation create the Invisible Man’s personal identity, he misses that Ellison uses *violence* to solidify said identity. Instead of making attractive violence that confirms a larger, racial identity, Ellison specifically upholds violence that allows for self-identification. This is not to say that there are not acts of communal violence that take place, but simply that the most liberating violence is that which separates the Invisible Man from the rest of society. Violence, unlike the simplistic domination of Wister’s Virginian, takes on a requirement of choice: what will violence create for the Invisible Man? Will he get to be free to be an individual man, or will he be lost and trapped within his racial group identity? He may not quite have the vast expanse that the Virginian looked to conquer, but Ellison’s protagonist conquers the urban frontier with as much violent exertion as any gunslinger.

Ellison’s protagonist is a man faced with never-ending contradictions. As he moves through his journey, he involves himself with violent act after violent act, each seemingly indistinguishable from the next. However, the subtle differences in the context of violence and his thoughts about identity and society show Ellison’s simple, masterful delineation between useful, individualizing and detrimental, co-opting violence. Perhaps

the most notable scene of violence is the *battle royale* which begins the Invisible Man's story. A recent high school graduate, our protagonist is thrust wide-eyed into a ring with roughly a dozen other African-American men who are all expected to fight for money (and the amusement of the white people watching them). As he struggles to understand the situation, he hears a voice cry out of the crowd that someone has their money on the larger man, the protagonist's opponent. When he hears this, the Invisible Man becomes confused; "Should I try to win against the voice out there? Would not this go against my speech, and was not this a moment for humility, for nonresistance?" (Ellison 25). So begins the Invisible Man's thought process that communal violence cannot achieve the goals of an individual.

Ellison illustrates the futility of such a fight when the men are called up to receive their prize money. Instead of simply handing them the money, there is first a small game of "chance" in which money is placed on a mat in front of them. The next several pages consist of the narrator describing the struggle to retrieve the money from mat, which has been electrified. In his descriptions, the men cease to be individual combatants and slip in and out of focus. Unlike the melee beforehand, the protagonist's experiences are in no way personalized. He begins to think of the group around him as "we": "But as *we* tried to leave *we* were stopped and ordered to get into the ring. There was nothing to do but what *we* were told," and, "Each of *us* was told the same" (Ellison 21, emphasis mine). It becomes painfully obvious through the narration that the black men in the ring are inseparable from one another in the eyes of these white "citizens." While logically, the violence here could be assumed to be the kind that is able to move a protagonist closer to his individual identity, it becomes clear that this is not the case. After being grouped with

the others, the Invisible Man is picked out as “the smartest boy we’ve got out here in Greenwood” (Ellison 29). This sense of pride is exactly what Baldwin mentions when he speaks of the protagonist as having “redeemed his manhood” (Baldwin 22). Yet, this identity has been *given* to him by a group of white men who still see him as just another “boy.” The Invisible Man moves fairly smoothly through his speech, and his confidence grows until he hits the phrases pertaining to “social equality” and “social responsibility.” At this point the white men become belligerent and start to laugh at the idea of this man being equal to them. The Invisible Man expected that if he resisted society through a normal violent means, he, like the Virginian, would be able to enter into the place in American identity where *he* could define *himself*. Unfortunately, the violence he engaged in required him to subsume his identity within a group and he is ultimately thwarted in his search for self-definition.

Normal, violent means as prescribed by the white group ultimately disappoint the Invisible Man’s quest for identity, and so he turns towards black men. While attending a speech with his college mentor the Invisible Man is told that he and the other gentlemen gathered with him must work hard to be like the Founder of Greenwood (the college he currently attends). The speaker explains that the African-Americans are “a fast-rising, people. Legends are still to be created. Be not afraid to undertake the burdens of your leader, and the work of the Founder will be one of ever unfolding glory” (Ellison 133). With words like “legend” and “glory,” it would seem that Ellison places his protagonist’s faith in his own racial identity. He feels comfortable with grouping himself with these men because of the power that seems to come with said identification. Unlike the group

of “boys” before, these black men form a strong, powerful identity that becomes attractive to the Invisible Man.

All begins to unravel during a conversation about the essence of the power within this group identity. As his mentor Dr. Bledsoe is explaining how he is to handle seeing a crime committed by a white man, the Invisible Man balks at the suggestion of turning a blind eye. This prompts Bledsoe to exclaim at him, “When you buck against me, you’re bucking against power, rich white folk’s power, the nation’s power” and that he should “let the white folk worry about pride and dignity—you learn where you are and get yourself power” (Ellison 144-145). This is exactly the kind of situation Baldwin envisioned a black protagonist in: non-violently using the system while keeping “humanity” intact. Such a statement comes as a slap in the face to our narrator. He expected these kinds of rationalizations from the white men who had surrounded him after the *battle royale*, but to hear it from someone of his own race should be unthinkable. Ellison sees this acceptance of power from a group identity as detrimental to the individuation of the Invisible Man. Instead of feeling like he is allowed to operate on his own moral code, he is expected to submit to the code that comes with being part of the black race. Even within his own racial group the Invisible Man’s search for identity is lost to a group mentality bent on keeping him from achieving it.

It is here that the Invisible Man becomes trapped in the paradox of Baldwin’s rejection of violence: he should not be predictably violent, but he still needs to individuate himself somehow. Ellison attempts to solve this problem by introducing the concept of violence that can affirm an individual identity. The rejection of group mentality begins as the Invisible Man stumbles upon and then attempts to join a union

meeting at Liberty Paint. As the union takes a vote on some inconsequential measure, they exclude the Invisible Man, explaining, "What you see here is the results of certain conditions here at the plant. We want you to know that we are only trying to protect ourselves. Someday we hope to have you as a member in good standing" (Ellison 223). It is right then that the concept of the group as identity distresses our protagonist. He begins to ask himself, "Why hadn't I *said* something, defended myself? Suddenly I snatched the wrapper off a sandwich and tore it violently with my teeth" (Ellison 224). No longer does he think in the terms of being defined within a group or by others; he feels this rejection personally. This very personal injury begins to force him to question the core of his own identity, and in the rawest stages of this feeling, he comes upon his supervisor. As the two exchange heated words, the Invisible Man begins a fight with him. Immediately, Ellison's prose switches from passive terms of subservience to strong, active words like "hard," "grunt," "angry," and "pain" (Ellison 226). The reader can feel this switch as something profound that affects the entirety of the Invisible Man's person. He vocalizes violence and anger for the first time, and he begins to own his own identity:

Adding insults I'd heard my grandfather use. "Why you old-fashioned, slavery-time, mammy-made, handkerchief-headed bastard, you should know better! What made you think you could threaten *my* life?" (Ellison 227)

The outburst here is not only the notion of American male physicality coming out; it is the solidification of his personal identity. The emphasis placed on the word "my" indicates that the speaker here views himself neither as part of a larger whole nor controlled by another. While Baldwin simply wrote this transformation off as yet another

protest novel giving in to the brutal “reality” that was the black man, Ellison spins it into a tale of reaching personal identity.

Although the Invisible Man has found his own path to close the gap between himself and a personal American male identity, he must learn to effectively utilize his violence. Soon after joining a racial group called the Brotherhood, the Invisible Man begins to work as rally speaker. As he begins to speak, he is again tempted by the comfortable communal identity and internalizes the tenor of the crowd, “the co-operative voice before [him]” (Ellison 342). Instead of feeling the power supposedly attached to the communal identity, he begins to feel as if he is acting “incorrectly, my voice sounding raspy and full of air, and after a few words I halted, embarrassed. [...] Something had to be done” (341). There is a gut reaction against falling in with the crowd, so he fights it. He begins “pitching strikes,” yelling, gesturing with his hands, and having his words “ripped from [his] solar plexus” (Ellison 345). Before that microphone, he is the man he was in the factory: strong, free, human, and known to himself. However, he is trying to funnel that same power into speech and language. Having tasted the power that comes from individualizing, he seeks to find that in the common racial identity of which he so desperately wants to be a part. The Invisible Man sees this as his chance to be like the Founder, to reject Bledsoe’s mentality, and to find himself while still remaining part of a group. However, seeking to further his own identity within a racial group like the Brotherhood defines him as part of society, the very thing an American male protagonist is supposed to be fighting against.

Even with the strength and power of a personal identity fueling the Invisible Man’s commitment to a group mentality, the outcome of group-identified violence can

only be personal identity loss. The embodiment of this paradox comes in the form of the Invisible Man's former friend Tod Clifton. Tod was once a rally speaker like our protagonist, but rejected the hive-mind mentality of the Brotherhood and was forced out. He falls even further in the narrator's eyes after he is witnessed selling Sambo dolls to white people on the street. After having bought into the Brotherhood as a safe place for identity, the Invisible Man cannot understand how or why Clifton would leave such a confirming place: "How on earth could he drop from Brotherhood to this in so short a time? And why if he has to fall back did he try and take the whole structure with him?" (Ellison 434). The Invisible Man wants so desperately to see what Clifton sees and experience the identity that seemed like it had the power to reshape the world around him, but before he can approach Clifton, his former friend begins running for an unknown reason. As the police take up the chase, the Invisible Man is jolted out of his reflection: "I heard the rapid explosions [...] and the cop sitting up straight now," and Clifton "fell forward on his knees, like a man saying his prayers" (Ellison 436). Clifton is the protagonist that Baldwin always envisions, a black man who embraces his humanity as part of his identity and seeks to find himself outside of the violent, racial Brotherhood and this is what dooms him.

Clifton attempts to reject the communal racial identity while simultaneously rejecting necessary American male violence and Ellison shows that such a dual rejection is impossible. Ellison does so by having the narrator realize that only the strongest forces will prevail:

only the events that the recorder regards as important that are put down, those lies his keepers keep their power by. But the cop would be Clifton's historian, his judge, his witness, and his executioner. (Ellison 439)

The Invisible Man now realizes that only force can truly carve out a place for a man to realize himself in America. For all his rejection and attempted individuation, Clifton is eventually overpowered by a stronger male (the policeman) in society and thus destroyed. Anything less than a full commitment to a violent rejection of society leaves one falling right back into being a puppet dancing on society's strings. In order to save himself and his own identity, the Invisible Man must find a way to establish himself as a individualized man in America.

Clifton's death solidifies not only the need to reject a large, group mentality but also illuminates that society is out to destroy individual men who are not strong enough to push back against it. As the Invisible Man sees a shopkeeper stopped from pursuing boys who stole from him, he is struck that he has been "asleep, dreaming" and that his commitment to society as a whole is going to cost him dearly (Ellison 444). With the institutions he has devoted all his time and effort to disintegrating around him, the Invisible Man turns to the one bastion of violence and power that can save him: himself. Baldwin would claim that Ellison here has a chance to separate *Invisible Man* from every other protest novel and reject the notion of violence as part of male identity, but in reality, that is not possible. The Invisible Man does fear the violence that gunned his friend down, what he fears more is the loss of any part of the identity that he has just begun to reach. Through the race-traitor Dr. Bledsoe to the lying Brotherhood to society's literal policemen, it dawns on the Invisible Man that all social groups are dangerous. Baym

notes that society in the American novel “exerts an unmitigated destructive pressure on individuality” and that “there is only one way to relate it [society] to the individual—as an adversary” (“Melodramas” 132). Baym gives a name to the mentality of the Invisible Man at this point. He is finally comfortable with facing the society around him as something to oppose instead of something to which to submit. Instead of removing the forces that are keeping black men from reaching their American masculine identity these social forces entrench societal expectations further. The Invisible Man may have believed that he has reached a place where he was an American man, but he was just as powerless as always. The white citizens, Dr. Bledsoe, the Brotherhood, all of these forces deny the Invisible Man his own violence and consequently his own identity in order to force him into roles or identities that serve their purposes. It is only through the acceptance and application of his personal violent side that he is able to realize and reach American male identity.

Finding violence in the middle of a race riot does not seem to be too daunting of a task, but the fact that the Invisible Man rejects communal violence in order to individuate himself is key. Instead of falling in line with the things that are going on around him, the Invisible Man begins to think for himself and define himself in opposition to the situation instead of by it. As the Invisible Man gets stuck in the thick of the riot and encounters Ras, the most violent member of the Brotherhood, he realizes, “I am no longer their brother” (Ellison 557). He and Ras then exchange words over who speaks the truth about their given situation. The Invisible Man fully realizes that such communal, group-identified violence is the exact kind he must fight against, that the Brotherhood is simply

giving into the societal expectations that are going to be used to keep it down. He openly rejects the idea that power can come from within a group.

The Invisible Man now takes ownership of his identity as an individual but this time he does so alone and violently. As he stands there and sees Ras on his horse, angry and vengeful, he understands:

Knowing who I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine [....] I knew it was better to live out one's own absurdity than to die for that of others. (Ellison 559)

Thus the final piece falls into place for the Invisible Man. He sees and understands what he needs to become an individual and instead of lying down and losing himself to the violent racial mob before him, he:

Let the spear fly and it was as though for a moment I had surrendered my life and begun to live again, watching it catch him as he turned his head to shout, ripping through both cheeks, and saw the surprised pause of the crowd as Ras wrestled with the spear that locked his jaws. (Ellison 560)

The Invisible Man uses a perfect act of violence to silence Ras, bringing himself full circle. The literal mouthpiece of group identity has been locked shut by a single, violent individual. Ellison takes his protagonist to the brink of individual identity, and then we watch him violently reach it. The Invisible Man is no longer tempted by the power that

seems to come from a group, but is comfortable and successful in his own, violent statement of individuality.

While the violent movements of the American male protagonist seem to take on many forms, those of African-American protagonists are some of the most complicated. Instead of having to simply assert themselves as dominant forces to those around them to simply deny their entrenchment in the American society, as white protagonists do, they have to achieve much more. Like any American male protagonist, the black protagonist needs to enact personal violence to successfully reject society. Yet, when this mentality meets up with the desire to feel solidarity with one's race, it creates a paradox for the black protagonist. Is he allowed to be an individual while he is part of these communal forces, or does he have to exist alone? Only when the Invisible Man violently rejects all identities but his own that he can truly reach a place where he is allowed to be a true American man. It is not a simple process, and it is not a common process; the negotiation of violence and the identity it can provide is one that requires a violent push against the world. Whether the American male protagonist is black or white, successful violence is the way that literature separates and defines men by allowing them to feel, in some of the Invisible Man's first words, their "vital aliveness" (Ellison 7).

Chapter 4: "Ending One Minute at a Time...": Symptoms of Our Violent Obsession

From chaps to chains and leather to denim, the American male protagonist has taken on as many forms as the American reader will let him. However, what he has done, without exception, is remain violent. Nina Baym broke new ground in the 1980s by claiming that since its inception, American literature has been male-focused. Now we can clearly see that not only has it been male, but it has been incredibly violent. While the impact of fictional violence has been argued back and forth between everyone from first ladies to video game designers, they all fail to see the reality behind violence. The power in the violence comes not from how it is acted out, but from the mere fact that we refuse to talk about it for what it really is. The American romanticization and normalization of violence has created a system where violence in fictional settings is important, isolating, and successful. The difference is that when these characteristics are translated into a modern, physical world, the romantic ideals fall away, and we see them for what they are: destructive. A real-world John McClane would be banned from New York, Tyler Durden arrested as a homegrown terrorist, and Jim West would have been slandered as a womanizing, do-nothing. However, none of these men are those things because we talk about them as heroes and continue to valorize their deeds, violent or otherwise.

By defining and accepting violent protagonists as ideals of American masculinity, masculine violence has become one of the most important and hidden values in our culture. This is not to argue that there is one prevailing type of American masculinity that both the Virginian and the Invisible Man exhibit. In fact, it would be very safe to argue that they both operate in very different spheres of masculinity. Still, one of the overarching links between them is the reliance on and justification of violence. American

men, as reflected in our literature, are required to engage in acts that we consider violent in order to divorce themselves from society, which is ostensibly us. Yet we always seem to want to valorize and replicate their behavior as desirable. Working off of critics like Baym and others, R.W. Connell discusses this reflection in his work "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." While he asserts that hegemonic masculinity does not always entail violence, "practice at a local level" can create a place of "hegemonic fantasy models [...] at the society wide [...] level" (840). He goes on to exhort that our concept of hegemonic masculinity has begun operating in a way that excludes "such 'positive' actions as bringing home a wage, maintaining a sexual relationship, and being a father" (Connell 841). Things that are attractive, like violence, are being replicated to the point at which they are pushing out other characteristics. Instead of furthering positive actions of masculinity, such as Connell describes, we are only idealizing the violent ones. The violence of American male identity is one that serves only the individuals who enact it.

This violence associated with American male protagonists in American literature is so decidedly male that it individualizes men to the point of isolation. When picturing Wister and Ellison's protagonists, it is nearly impossible to picture them in a crowd of people, as part of a team, or deeply connected with anyone else. The Invisible Man is lauded as an embodiment of the rebellious American spirit circa 1950, and he tells his entire tale from a basement apartment from which he fights a never-ending battle against the rest of society (Dickstein 40). The Virginian is a man whose entire career is set up to be a leader without equal and whose closest female connection must "capitulate" and lose her sensibilities to live with him. Basically, in order to realize true American male

identity (as these protagonists have) American men are told they must fully isolate themselves from all of society. Even as late as Palahniuk's 1996 *Fight Club*, the protagonist creates a fictional person as one more layer of isolation from those around him. Violence allows American protagonists to act as their own sounding board for morality and action; they can now justify every action they take, including violent ones. Without believing that there is a need to listen to outside input, the American male is welcome to stand alone by his horse, lock his basement apartment up, or get advice from his self-created imaginary friend and be subject to no rule but his own. It is exactly this mentality, in which the American male protagonist answers to no one but himself, that allows the American male to sustain such a detrimental and dangerous precedent.

In contemporary popular culture, American men are presented with isolating, violent protagonists who are as attractive as they are dangerous. Two American male protagonists in the forefront of recent American media are 2007's Daniel Plainview of *There Will Be Blood* based on a character by Upton Sinclair and The Narrator/Tyler Durden of *Fight Club*. In each of these works, the men are placed in moral and social quandaries that require them to make some hard decisions and commit some terrible actions. Plainview enacts countless and bloody acts of revenge upon men who have wronged him and Palahniuk's split protagonist looks to show society the error of its ways by holding it at gun point or blowing it up. Our obsession and lauding of these men does not include even a remote recognition of their violence as dangerous. From Tyler Durden being ranked as the "greatest character in film" (*Empire*) ever to Daniel Day Lewis' portrayal of Plainview netting him two Oscars and a Golden Globe, each and every one of these violent men and their journeys have been made into icons. Even *Variety's* review

of *There Will Be Blood* refers to the film as “scratching, peeling, and digging away at a man determined to divest himself of his past and everyone associated with it” (McCarthy). *Fight Club* received similar reviews when it splashed onto the screen; it was lauded as a “sustained adrenaline rush of a movie about a guru who advocates brutality and mayhem [that] should excite and exhilarate young audiences everywhere in significant numbers” (Rooney). While the McCarthy review comes closer to something resembling recognition of the violence in the film, the Rooney piece simply congratulates the film on being something that young men everywhere will love. The obvious questions about violence, destruction, fear, and death are absent. Where are the questions about the danger of thinking that it is okay to blow up downtown or gun men down in the streets? Even the most modern interpretations of the American male protagonists are creating a man who is alone, violent, and successful: a man worth raptly watching.

Perhaps the biggest problem with the American male identity being so rooted in and accepting of violence is that not everyone can achieve it. Quite obviously, there are groups who will fail to fit this paradigm, and thus are marginalized in society. They become the objects that a man must push against in order to assure himself an identity. Baym argues that this has always happened to women and that immigrants have seen shades of it as well. However, what option does that leave these groups? Is there a way for them to reach an identity that is uniquely theirs and that is equally as potent and successful as the one achieved by the American male protagonists, or are they forever doomed to be cast as the tools used by others? If all women were to act as Molly does and submit to this strong, dominant male identity, they would be forfeiting any chance at reaching their own, personal American identities? Such a hegemonic sense of identity

sounds terribly disadvantageous to society when spoken out loud, but when acted out in literature, it is accepted as something that “needs to happen.” Perhaps, in our post-war, terrorist fighting, new American depression that “is our lives,” (*Fight Club*) fighting is our salvation, the way in which we will ultimately save ourselves from losing all sense of identity. Or perhaps we are just so comfortable with this mentality and the male violence associated with it that we refuse to see the problems inherent in it or seek alternatives to it. We are left in a place where the myth of violence as a key and acceptable part of the American male protagonists, needs to be questioned. But is questioning enough? Can we ever wake up, or are we too comfortable dreaming of our hero bursting in, guns blazing, and landing a few good kicks to the gut before he carries us off to a blood-soaked happily ever after?

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