

## DOCTORAL THESIS

### In the periphery of the margin: white masculinity in contemporary American fiction

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## Abstract

My thesis discusses male identity in contemporary culture in relation to work by Bret Easton Ellis and Chuck Palahniuk. Such work reflects the problems, anxieties, and dilemmas of the masculine subject in American culture. The characters in my six selected texts, namely, Ellis' *Less Than Zero*, *American Psycho*, and *Glamorama*, and Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, *Survivor*, and *Choke*, symbolize a generation with no discernible future. Each male protagonist finds himself in a place of no time and no meaning because image and illusion have supplanted essence. These characters combat culture-prevalent emptiness in the sense that each ironically re-asserts his so-called individuality against the dogmas of the establishment. Each, furthermore, is aware that his existence is not subject to a higher order or preset goal: traditional morality thereby has no meaning. My selected texts feature masculine subjects struggling with their own contingencies once stripped of given privileges (gender, class, race, and otherwise).

To examine the notion of masculinity, I emphasize the role of power relations in gender construction. Bret Easton Ellis characterizes a world of appearance defined by particular styles. Chuck Palahniuk's males are empty—they do not have any definitive meaning. Judith Butler challenges the proposition of a fixed identity, or an essential permanent masculinity or femininity as structured and reified by social norms. Therefore, we should not view masculinity as a cohesive and homogeneous category. Following Foucault, I examine the relationship between masculine subjects and social practices. At stake here, is how the performative articulation of proper masculinity disempowers and imprisons the masculine subject in a material form over which he has no control. The body becomes the object of desire and thus the vehicle/preserve of the sense of powerlessness that the masculine subject experiences daily within a hegemonic culture. Power is exercised through a dominant presence. This presence structures as a binary classification serving to underscore differences and ensure particular privileged social positioning. The proposition of a fixed identity, or an essential permanent masculinity or femininity, is structured and reified by social norms. Masculinity as a cohesive and homogeneous category is historically represented as an unstable center from which all other identities are defined.

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