Consumerism, Perfection, and Modernity in Fight Club


Theme Analysis

In order to understand what motivates the characters of *Fight Club*, we have to understand what they’re fighting against. Overall, much of the novel’s project involves satirizing modern American life, particularly what the novel sees as the American obsession with consumerism and the mindless purchasing of products.

At first, the protagonist and *Narrator* of the book is portrayed as a kind of slave to his society’s values; he describes himself as being addicted to buying sofas and other pieces of furniture. The Narrator is trapped in a society of rampant consumerism, in which people are pushed (both by advertisements and by a general culture of materialism) to spend their money on things they don’t need, until buying such things is their only source of pleasure. The richest characters in the novel are so obsessed with buying *things* that they lavish fortunes on incredibly trivial items like perfume and mustard, while the poorest starve. As with any addiction, the characters’ consumerism is endless—no matter how many products they buy, they always feel an unquenchable thirst for more.

Another important aspect of modern American life, as the novel portrays it, is the emphasis on beauty and perfection, whether in a human body or in something like an apartment. “These days,” the Narrator’s alter ego, *Tyler Durden*, says, everybody looks fit and healthy, because everybody goes to the gym. In contemporary American society, the “perfect man” is supposed to be well-off, well-dressed, fit, own lots of nice furniture, and have a pleasant attitude at all times, ensuring that he impresses everyone around him. The novel suggests that America’s obsession with beauty and exercise and its obsession with consumer goods are one and the same: they’re both rooted in a desire to appear “perfect”—essentially to “sell themselves.” The result is that human beings themselves become “products,” just like a sofa or a jar of mustard.

In contrast to consumerism, the novel depicts traditional sources of fulfillment and pleasure, such as family and religion, as either nonexistent or fragmented. The Narrator barely knows or speaks to his father, and none of the characters in the novel are presented as believing in God—the implication being that consumerism has become America’s new “religion” (but, of course, a religion that doesn’t offer any profound meaning about life, or even real happiness). In structuring their lives around transient, superficial pleasures like the purchasing of products, consumers deny themselves any deeper emotional or spiritual satisfaction—a vacuum that Tyler’s fight club (and then Project Mayhem) attempts to fill.

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

The *Narrator* flies back to his home, only to find that the airline has retained his luggage. Apparently, the Narrator’s suitcase was vibrating during baggage inspection, suggesting that it might have contained a bomb (though it’s probably just an electric razor, or a dildo). The Narrator leaves the airport without a bag, only to discover that his condominium has blown up. Everything in the
Narrator’s life was in his condo, he thinks: his furniture, his dishware. Previously, buying furniture was like a drug for the Narrator: he’d buy “one last” sofa, only to buy another one a month later. The things you own, he thinks, ended up owning you.

The Narrator has a minor problem (he loses his bag, because the airline thinks it might be a bomb) only to face a major problem: he loses his worldly possessions because there was a bomb in his condominium (as is later revealed). The loss of his possessions forces the Narrator to confront the truth; he was addicted to buying things. In retrospect, the Narrator can see that he’s devoted his life to consumerism—he’s a slave to his own appetite for appliances and furniture, addicted to things.

Active Themes

The Narrator arrives back at his condominium to find police officers gathered outside. They tell the Narrator that he might have left his gas on, or there might have been a leak. Eventually, the gas could have caused an explosion. The Narrator is horrified at the thought that all the mustard in his fridge—14 different kinds—has been destroyed. The police officers tell him that they haven’t ruled out the possibility of arson.

In a darkly comic moment, the Narrator seems more upset with the loss of his jars of mustard than with the fact that other people might have been hurt. The Narrator is so obsessed with products and appliances that he can only think about products, not people (or, put another way, his possessions take on the importance of real human beings). The passage also foreshadows the police’s investigation into the explosion.

With nowhere to go, the Narrator calls Tyler Durden and explains what happened to him. Tyler is amused, and agrees to meet the Narrator at a bar. They drink heavily, and eventually Tyler offers the Narrator a place to crash. In return for the favor, Tyler asks the Narrator to hit him as hard as he can.

The passage ends with Tyler asking the Narrator to hurt him. In a way, Tyler’s desire parallels the Narrator’s need to go to cancer support groups: they both want to experience suffering to jolt themselves out of boredom and experience something “real.” Where the Narrator has been experiencing suffering vicariously through suffering people, Tyler wants to feel actual, physical pain.