

Fight Club: The Return of Hobbes

Hobbes is reborn as Tyler to save "Jack" (a grown-up Calvin) from the slough of un-comic despair.

By Galvin P. Chow

In the film *Fight Club*, the real name of the protagonist (Ed Norton's character) is never revealed. Many believe the reason behind this anonymity is to give "Jack" more of an *everyman* quality. Do not be deceived. "Jack" is really Calvin from the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*. It's true. Norton portrays the grown-up version of Calvin, while Brad Pitt plays his imaginary pal, Hobbes, reincarnated as Tyler Durden.

Part I: The Hobbes-Tyler Connection

Picture this: a hyper, self-absorbed child initially concocts an imaginary friend as the ideal playmate, to whom more realistic qualities soon become attributed. This phantasm becomes a completely separate personality, with his own likes, dislikes, and temperament—and the imaginer and the imagined clash and argue constantly, though remaining fast friends. This pattern continues to the point where the child begins to perceive what was originally mere fantasy to be *reality*.

Just as Calvin has an imaginary jungle-animal friend named Hobbes, whom everyone else believes to be nothing but a stuffed toy, "Jack" in *Fight Club* has an imaginary cool-guy friend named Tyler, whom no one but Jack can see.

In both cases, the entity that began as the ideal companion soon took on a more realistic, three-dimensional quality. In other words, they became *real*. This is evident in that both Hobbes and Tyler also began to function as scapegoats for their creators. For instance, consider that Calvin often blames broken lamps and other assorted household mischief on Hobbes, and that Jack is inclined to believe that *Fight Club* and other various anti-society mischief is brought about by Tyler, not himself. Calvin claims Hobbes pounces on him every day after school; Jack believes Tyler beats him up next to 40 kilotons of nitroglycerin in a parking garage—the list goes on and on. The relationships between the two sets of friends are the exact same. Is this mere coincidence?

Filling in the time-gap between Calvin and Jack, we can imagine the story as something like this: Once Calvin reaches the hostile environment known as the seventh grade, the constant teasing from the other students and the

frustrated concern of his parents finally becomes too much, and a reluctant, disillusioned Calvin is finally forced to grow up, or at least begin to. This decision is sealed by one of the hardest things young Calvin will ever have to do in his life: un-imagine Hobbes, an act which to Calvin is essentially no different from murder. After being Calvin's best friend for over a decade, Hobbes is packed away in a box, or tossed carelessly into a garbage bag, perhaps even stuffed under the same bed that once contained so many monsters. This is all, of course, very painful for Calvin, so much so that he represses it all in shame. Little does Calvin suspect that while he is busy growing up, deciding what "dinettes" define him as a person, Hobbes is also maturing in the recesses of his mind, waiting to be unleashed at an appropriate time.

It's worth noting that during these twenty or so years, Hobbes never bears a grudge against Calvin nor wishes any ill upon him. Hobbes, remembering the depth of their past friendship, does not hate Calvin but rather hates the society that *made* Calvin put him away. Hobbes, residing in Calvin's mind, sees and experiences all that Calvin does—and truly despises all of it. He witnesses a bright, superbly imaginative kid (with a genius-level vocabulary) reduced to nothing more than another nameless cog. Fighting off the tears wept for his conventionalized pal, Hobbes resolves to set Calvin free, paying special attention when Calvin idly looks up homemade-napalm recipes on the Internet.

Flash forward to the timeframe depicted in *Fight Club*. Calvin/Jack has reached an all-time low. He has done everything society has told him to do but is completely void of happiness. Hobbes, newly adjusted as "Tyler Durden" (after all, grown-up Calvin would no longer accept a jungle animal walking, talking, and eating canned tuna), re-enters Calvin/Jack's life, determined to show Calvin everything he's done wrong, whether he likes it or not.

Tyler to Jack: "I look like you wanna look, I fuck like you wanna fuck, I'm smart, capable, and most importantly, I'm free in all the ways you wish you could be."

Calvin has always idolized Hobbes. In *Weirdos From Another Planet*, he dresses up like a tiger and attempts to live in the woods. Like Hobbes, Tyler is cool, collected, and incredibly cerebral. Given this evidence, one can conclude that Tyler is Hobbes, reincarnated after being trapped inside

Calvin/Jack's brain for so many years. Just as Calvin is Jack, Hobbes is Tyler.

Part II: Marla Singer—Avatar of Susie Derkins?

Somewhere between the end of high school and beginning of college, uptight, grade-obsessed Susie Derkins lost her way. The pressure to get good grades, the pressure to succeed, simply became too much for her, and she snapped.

Free from the protective bonds of her parents' guidance and the bland safety of her suburban home, Susie loses her moral bearings entirely and sinks into a dark, seamy, grim world of sex, drugs, and eccentric Albert-Einstein-like hair. Her transformation is so complete that she no longer even remotely resembles the upright citizen that her parents and society wanted her to be: thus, she changes her name.

Like Calvin, Susie has become a misfit, one of society's lost lambs. It is for this reason that she soon finds herself frequenting support groups such as "Remaining Men Together." Fate has brought her back to Calvin, whom she probably spurned back in junior high. But the two have changed so much that they no longer recognize each other!

The pink dress Marla wears in one scene slightly resembles something that "Binky Betsy," Susie's favorite childhood doll, once wore: the doll that Calvin stole and attempted to ransom. While Calvin and Susie mostly teased and tortured each other, *Hobbes* was infatuated with the raven-haired beauty. Accordingly, Jack despises Marla, whereas Tyler takes an *ahem* sort of interest in her (definitely inappropriate for the Sunday Funnies).

When we are first introduced to Marla, she is but a tumor on Jack's slowly deteriorating world. She is disenfranchised, morbid, socially apathetic—and Jack despises her because she is a mirror image of himself, his own female double. On the other hand, Calvin hates Susie because she is his exact opposite: Bright, obedient, demure—the unruly Calvin has every reason to hate her. However, certain strips definitely infer that Calvin has somewhat of a crush on Susie, and some even imply that Susie shares these latent feelings. But as a cootie-fearing grade-schooler, Calvin may only express these strange feelings through attention-getting antagonisms such as constant snowballs to the head, ransoming her dolls—and through his separate, conveniently more mature other personality—Hobbes.

Unlike Calvin, Hobbes has never been bashful about showing his affection for Susie. Calvin's imaginary tiger-friend has called her a "cutie," worn swim jams to impress her ("Girls flip for guys in jams"), and even claimed he would betray their club's secret code if she gave him a tummy rub (which is one of the key differences between Tyler and Hobbes). Naturally, all of this confuses and frustrates Calvin beyond words, even though Hobbes is really nothing more than a product of his own mind! And though Hobbes and Susie never consummated their love for each other (he's a stuffed tiger and she's a kid, you sicko!) this is, of course, the *exact* same deranged love-triangle that is shared between Jack, Tyler, and Marla, or at least a natural progression thereof. Perhaps Marla puts up with Jack/Tyler's apparent nonsense for so long, because it's the sort of thing she became used to as a child? And perhaps, in the end, Jack finds solace in Marla because it's the exact same connection he should've made long ago, in his suburban youth. A connection that may have saved them both.

Part III: GROSS—Precursor of Fight Club

When you boil it down, the Fight Club that Jack and Tyler start is really just an odd sort of boys' club—no ovaries allowed—where men can be men, and the so-called stronger of the sexes can take solace in the fact that, even in our politically correct times, some exclusivities of manhood still remain. (As a side note, imagine how much more controversy the movie would have generated if it involved scenes of men fighting women on equal ground!)

And clubs like this, of course, have their beginnings in backyards, tree houses, and garages all over America. Not surprisingly, Calvin started such a club when he was six years old. Little did anyone realize that he would construct another one much later in his life, again with the aid of an imaginary friend. For just as Calvin, Hobbes, and Susie have dark future versions in Jack, Tyler, and Marla respectively, G.R.O.S.S. (**Get Rid Of Slimy girls**) has the same in Fight Club.

G.R.O.S.S. shares the following characteristics with Fight Club:

- Both have catchy names (although the "slimy" part of G.R.O.S.S. is redundant, otherwise it doesn't spell anything).
- Both are co-run by a friendless male and his imaginary companion (Calvin is Tyrant and Dictator-for-Life; Hobbes is President and First Tiger).

- Both are exclusively male organizations, although Fight Club's membership is considerably larger.
- Along with that, all members of both organizations are very loyal.
- The leaders of both organizations constantly engage in fistfights (but only in G.R.O.S.S. does a member receive a demerit for biting).
- And in said fights, in both organizations, there is only one fight at a time!
- Both are supposedly very secretive (though Jack never tells his mother about Fight Club).
- At least one leader of both organizations is fond of giving speeches (though Calvin never uses the term "space monkey").

G.R.O.S.S. and Fight Club both wreak havoc on their respective neighborhoods (G.R.O.S.S.'s target is considerably more focused, i.e., Susie). Clearly, the roots of Fight Club can be seen in G.R.O.S.S. Calvin shows his penchant for such male-oriented, destructive organizations. Also, just like cardboard-box-time-machines and water-gun-transmogrifiers, G.R.O.S.S. was likely created as an escape, a release—as, of course, was Fight Club.

Part IV: Moe Develops Karmic Bitch-Tits

Robert "Moe" Paulson, Calvin's grade-school bully, becomes a six-time weight-lifting champion, and somewhere along the line develops large man-boobs as a result of testicular cancer. This of course leads him to his support group, where he is shocked to find Calvin.

Moe greatly regrets his bullying days, but, too ashamed to reveal his true identity to Calvin, he instead offers his ample bosom for him to cry on, as a measure of retribution.

Part V: The Root of Evil

Although we've already learned of the fates of Hobbes, Susie, and Moe, there are a couple of other people important to Calvin that are missing. People that are even more integral to his development than (arguably) Hobbes: his parents. Mr . . . uhm . . . , and Mrs . . . uh. . . . Okay, so they don't have names. But then again, there is no *need* to know them. Because in the comic strip, they're not supposed to be important characters in their own right. They only matter in regards to how Calvin is directly effected by them; an effect which, by the time of the film, doesn't seem to have been very positive. From what "Jack" mentions, he's not exactly close to his

parents, particularly his dad, on whom he seems to pin many of his problems. And this matches perfectly with the relationship depicted in the comic, as well as with what happened afterwards (in Part I).

Calvin's dad seems to have done quite a number on his son. As stated, it was probably at his urging that Calvin "grew up," that is, finally started to conform to society's rules, which was the death of Hobbes. Of course, his father wasn't without his playful side—good-naturedly teasing Calvin at every opportunity—but perhaps this is why "Jack" resents him so much. Maybe after Jack reached the end of his dutiful journey, only to find emptiness, he thought back to the day his father told him that the sun sets down somewhere in Arizona every night. "Maybe," thought Calvin, "maybe ALL of it's been just another one of Dad's cruel jokes."

In the "bathtub" scene of *Fight Club*, "Jack" and Tyler discuss their woeful parents. In this scene, crucial information is revealed, as well as some inconsistencies. "Jack" claims his father left when he was six, an age when Calvin's dad was obviously still around, but this statement is contradicted soon after, when Tyler mentions his own dad telling him to get married when he was thirty, to which "Jack" responds, "mine said that *too*." The self-pitying "Jack" is most likely seeking to garner additional sympathy from his newfound friend by making his childhood sound worse than it actually was.

But even more interesting is Tyler's hostility towards his father: when "Jack" asks him who he would fight, if he could fight anyone, he answers, "I'd fight my father." But, since Tyler is only a figment of Jack's imagination, we can only assume he's referring to *Jack's* father. And while this hatred would only make sense given that the two are sharing the same brain, why is it that Tyler seems to hate Jack's father even more vividly than "Jack" himself does? Maybe it's because Tyler hasn't forgotten who's ultimately responsible for the un-imagining that took place years before . . . maybe he's still not too happy about it . . . and maybe he's got some pretty good ideas for revenge.

The role of Calvin's father in all of this is no small one. Other than to "save" Calvin, it's entirely possible that Tyler's real motivation for taking down civilization is simply to get back at Calvin's father. For by destroying the society that forced Calvin into repressing Hobbes, he's also destroying the society that Calvin's father, after all, epitomizes. And this of course allows Hobbes an indirect measure of revenge.

Part VI: Calvin—"I Am Jack's Lost Youth"

Although the personality differences between Calvin in the comic strip and Calvin in the movie are pretty large, it can be explained as easily as taking Id and introducing him to Superego ("Jack" actually seems to have sort of a Super-Superego). Nearly all people go through the same thing when first confronted with the crushing grind of reality. But, as they say, the bigger they are, the harder they fall—and in terms of imagination and dreams, Calvin was a giant.

Still, it's not as though common traits between Calvin-Calvin and Jack-Calvin can't be identified at all. Besides a preference for imaginary friends over real ones, and an inability to express affection for girls, Calvin has never done well when forced to play by any sort of rules. Take, for instance, his utter inability in any sort of organized sport, compared to his unbridled joy while playing the make-it-up-as-you-go-along "Calvinball."

Furthermore, even at age 6 Calvin never exactly thrived in stifling, authoritarian establishments (i.e., school), and he's always had clashes with authority figures since the strip began (his parents, the doctor, his teacher, Rosalyn)—which actually may have initially planted the seeds for Tyler. Beyond that, his excellent vocabulary and way with words are still with him in the voice-over narration of *Fight Club*, and his rampant materialism that started with mail-order propeller-beanies ends with yin-yang shaped tables. As for the differences, they can be credited to the demoralizing effect of reality.

In the end, Calvin's involvement with Fight Club and return of Hobbes can be boiled down to two words: "Personal Responsibility." For although Fight Club and Project Mayhem were both mostly Tyler's doing, by the end of the movie, Jack readily accepts his own part of the blame, as Tyler is his creation. And by doing so, he also accepts responsibility for the undesirable condition of his own *life*—his father may have pushed him, but Calvin himself was the one who chose to obey. It is through this newfound self-accountability that Calvin/Jack is able to take control of his own life at last. As skyscrapers flash and crumble in the background, and blood oozes from the bullet hole in his head, Calvin says that he is "okay." And we are apt to believe him.

Part VII: Conclusion

Calvin's world in the comic strip is pure, romanticized idealism, whereas in the movie, he lives in gray, bleak reality. Within the safety of the panel,

Calvin is perpetually six years old, terrible things can never happen, and no matter how crazy a stunt he pulls, everything always returns to status quo. Because of this, our hero is free to do as he wishes, free to chase his dreams as wildly as he desires, never having to worry about tomorrow because there essentially will never *be* one—unless it's part of a continuing storyline. This makes the reality of *Fight Club* all the bleaker, because it depicts what happens when you take someone weaned on dreams and limitless possibilities and jam him into a cramped cage confined by rules and regulations. It probably only took poor Calvin a few years in the adult world (or growing-up world) to fully make the sad change.

This transition from gleeful Calvin to dull "Jack" is not uncommon. Little Nemo became a banker, Peter Pan became a lawyer, and Garfield was caught and butchered by the chef of a Chinese restaurant. (One exception is Charlie Brown, who from all indications was mentally middle-aged at the time of his birth.)

The moral of the story is that reality bites, kiddies. Calvin and Hobbes in *Fight Club* are proof of this sad, sad truth.

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Discussion Questions:

1. In the film, Calvin and Hobbes actually reversed many personality traits as Jack and Tyler. Is it possible that Calvin is the personality that got repressed and Hobbes is the one that did the "growing up"?
2. Tyler wears a fur coat near the end of the movie. What is the significance of this garment, given his past incarnation as a jungle animal?
3. If Calvin really wanted to change things, why didn't he just dust off his old cardboard-box time machine and hop in?
4. After the end of *Fight Club*, when Calvin realizes he's effectively killed Hobbes twice now, do you really think he'll still be "okay"?