

# CONSUMERISM – A (POST)MODERN ILLUSION

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*Abstract: Post-modern life is fragmented. It is distorted. Postmodern literature shadows the reality of the Postmodern man. As the characters try to put their lives together, to mix and match shattered pieces of their identities at the same time we, as readers, have to combine and untangle the chronology of the books. Self-destruction could be either a consequence of the devastating consumerist tendencies or it could be one's personal and subjective means of escaping the consumerist trend. There are, thus, two seemingly different paths one could take in his journey of initiation in self-destruction, but both of them meet at the cross-roads with consumerism. Rabelais' characters ate their way towards this divine sense of comfort, Miguel de Cervantes created a character that almost hallucinated his way towards self-destruction, Herman Melville presented us with an obsession that grew bigger than the character's desire for self-preservation and self-protection and Chuck Palahniuk introduces several types of Postmodern characters that try to own the path to self-destruction. For the Postmodern man, the obsession that leads to self-destruction is not the love for a Dulcinea, nor a life-long desire to be known, but a chaotic desire to consume.*

Key words: violence, alienation, male identity, oedipal crisis, eroticism

*With many qualifications—with more qualifications as the patriarchal tradition has gradually weakened— the general rule is felt to be right and binding that women should consume only for the benefit of their masters. The objection of course presents itself that expenditure on women's dress and household paraphernalia is an obvious exception to this rule; but it will appear in the sequel that this exception is much more obvious than substantial.*  
(Veblen 2007: 52)

The link between postmodernism and self-destruction - as a core tendency of human nature – is an interesting one. Postmodernism

may have changed the type of journey one takes towards self-destruction and maybe the reasons and the intensity of the destructive nature of human beings, but it has not changed the illusion of an almost sacred comfort that comes along with self-destruction.

How did we get here? Consumerism is built on desire – a type of desire that is misunderstood as *need*. What does this mean? It means that humans feel a thrive when exceeding their basic needs, when they feel they own and have more than their subsistence required.

One of the most salient examples of the ease and euphoria that surround the consumerist vortex is Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt*, a 46-year-old apathetic character whose day job is to sell houses: "*his name was George F. Babbitt. He was forty-six years old now, in April, 1920, and he made nothing in particular, neither butter nor shoes nor poetry, but he was nimble in the calling of selling houses for more than people could afford to pay*" (2006: 4). From his very first description, we are fed the idea that George is a common man, the regular next-door neighbor that you greet in the morning before going to work, but that does nothing or has nothing to draw your attention. He is not particularly intelligent, he is not handsome, "*his large head was pink, his brown hair thin and dry*" nor is he wealthy, so he is the type of individual that does nothing to stand out (2006: 4). Despite his common looks, ordinary build, and mediocre but prosperous social status, George has given into consumerism as a path towards social standing and recognition. He yearns for little luxuries and admits to being easily manipulated by different advertisements and commercials. In other words, he is the modern consumer, a consumer that, as we have already mentioned, succumbs to desire.

George is dissatisfied with his life; he vehemently opposes conformity and finds his escape in consumption. His stingy dissatisfaction with life is salient from the first pages of the novel, where we walk along with George in his dreams, only to be awakened by the alarm clock: "*he escaped from reality till the alarm-clock rang, at seven-twenty*" when it was time for him to face life and go to work (2006: 5). What alarm clock? Not a regular one, as we are about to find out, for "*it was the best of nationally advertised and quantitatively produced alarm-clocks, with all modern attachments, including cathedral chime, intermittent alarm, and a phosphorescent dial. Babbitt was proud of being awakened by such a rich device. Socially it was almost as creditable as buying expensive cord tires*" (2006: 5). What we understand is that George's alarm clock pushes him up the