I AM LOUISE’S INFLAMED SENSE OF REJECTION: A PSYCHOANALYTIC EXPLORATION OF LOUISE BOURGEOIS’ *THE DESTRUCTION OF THE FATHER*

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

At the end of David Fincher’s film adaptation of the psychological thriller *Fight Club* (1999), the unnamed narrator, portrayed by Edward Norton, shoots himself in the head and kills his alter-ego, Tyler Durden, portrayed by Brad Pitt. Moments earlier, the narrator discovered that his unconscious created Durden as a sadistic yet charming outlet for the narrator’s deep-seated aggression towards modern life in the late twentieth-century. In Jim Uhls’ screenplay (1998), the narrator’s act of self-violence via suicide is his attempt to regain control, even if it means his own death. Shockingly, despite blowing off the side of his face, the narrator survives and the camera reveals a dead Durden with a bullet wound in the middle of his forehead. Fincher’s film ends with the relieved narrator watching the fallout of Durden’s destruction. Even though, the narrator is relieved, the audience notices a random frame showing male genitals in the final minutes of the movie. This callback to one of Durden’s original acts of anarchy reveals that Durden is not gone but only temporarily subdued.¹ Even after his violent disposal of Durden, the narrator is unable to ultimately free himself from his alter-ego.² At first, Fincher’s hyper-masculinized interpretation of Chuck Palahniuk’s novel (1996) appears to be quite different from the artwork of Louise Bourgeois. The film primarily focuses on the development of male “bonding” through violence, a feeling of disenfranchisement by a feminized society, and a desire

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¹ A callback is a reference in a scene to something that occurred earlier in the film. Unlike a flashback, a callback does not replay the earlier scene. It presents or comments on the original scene in a new context.

² The end of the movie is quite different from the end of Chuck Palahniuk’s novel of the same name. The novel ends with the narrator in an insane asylum, which he presumes to be heaven. However, he grimly discovers that not only is he alive, but that the anarchist group that he and Durden created, Project Mayhem, have infiltrated the mental hospital, and are waiting for additional instructions from Durden.
for physical power. Conversely, Bourgeois’ work primarily examines her childhood and the artist’s emotional reaction to it. Even so, the violent reaction of the narrator and his unbreakable bond with Durden provides a personification of the unconscious’ attempt to resolve, rather maladaptively, internal conflicts. For the protagonist of Palahniuk’s novel and Fincher’s film, the unconscious’ resolution was the birth of Durden. In the case of Bourgeois, the unconscious’ resolution was the continuous murder of her father through her art. Starting with her 1974 work *The Destruction of the Father* (Figures 1 & 2), Bourgeois created works that confront the emotionally abusive relationship with her father.

*The Destruction of the Father* is Bourgeois’ most obvious attempt at killing her father.

The soft, glowing, fleshy cavern is an enactment of the artist’s desire to kill her father over the family dinner table. Bourgeois states:

> There is a dinner table and you can see all kinds of things happening. The father is sounding off, telling the captive audience how great he is, all the wonderful things he did, all the bad people he put down today. But this goes on day after day. A kind of resentment grows in the children. There comes a day they get angry. Tragedy is in the air. Once too often, he has said his piece.
> The children grabbed him and put him on the table. And he became the food. They took him apart, dismembered him. Ate him up. So he was liquidated…the same way he had liquidated his children.³

Even though Bourgeois did not physically murder her father, she states that the artistic process of the work excavated such visceral memories and emotions that to her the murder actually happened. She had symbolically lived the experience at the dinner table.⁴ According to Bourgeois, *The Destruction of the Father* “exorcised” her fear and as a result she was a


⁴ Bourgeois, “Statements from an Interview with Donald Kuspit,” in *Destruction*, 158.
“different person.” Yet, in many works following *The Destruction of the Father* Bourgeois continues to return to the theme of patricide.

Given its supposed therapeutic value, why is the murderous fantasy of *The Destruction of the Father* constantly reenacted in Bourgeois’ art? Bourgeois’ obsessive interest in her childhood has been viewed as her attempt to resolve the problems of her past and reach some sort of inner closure on her traumatic childhood. According to art historian and Bourgeois specialist, Marie-Laure Bernadac: “Confessions, self-portraits, memories, fantasies of a troubled being who seeks from sculpture the peace and order lacking in her childhood – such is the work of Louise Bourgeois.” And it is clear in Bourgeois’ own comments that her art served as an outlet for her psychological damage. In an interview with art historian Robert Storr, Bourgeois stated, “Once a sculpture is done, it has served its purpose and has eliminated the anxieties that I had. The anxieties are gone forever. They will never come back. I know. It works.”

The psychic trauma Bourgeois suffered at the hands of her controlling father was so great that it could not be resolved in a single artwork. However, there is possibly another motivation for Bourgeois’ continuing fascination with the murder of her father. In “Return of the Repressed,” curator and writer Philip Larratt-Smith borrowed from psychoanalytic theory and asserted that Bourgeois’ artistic fixation on the past is an attempt by the artist to annihilate unconscious fantasies and desires as well as problems originating in her childhood, such as the introduction of her father’s mistress into the family home. Unfortunately, by re-enacting the trauma of her childhood through her art, Bourgeois recalls these unconscious fantasies and receives immense pleasure.

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5 Bourgeois, “Donald Kuspit,” 158.
from her violent artistic endeavor. In order to obtain such pleasure again, she is forced to return to the same activity. Since Bourgeois’ past is dominated by her relationship with her father, the artist first killed her father in The Destruction of the Father and subsequently re-killed him in later works: Cell III, Nature Study, and Cell (Arch of Hysteria).

In The Destruction of the Father there is a strong tension between various dualisms including male and female, pleasure and pain, and revulsion and desire. This fixation is common in Bourgeois’ work and is easy to track throughout most of her art. Following this thread of polarities before and after The Destruction of the Father, this thesis foregrounds the origin and compulsion of the artist’s murderous fantasies towards her father. As a child, the artist endured her father’s emotional and psychological abuse. Bourgeois’ father became part of the artist’s unconscious and lived on in her thoughts, behaviors, and actions. Bourgeois’ artwork examines her patricidal fantasies and consequently reveals how her father lived on in the artist’s unconscious. Finally, this thesis will shed light on why Bourgeois’ project is ultimately unsuccessful in terms of catharsis and why she continued to repeat the compulsion to kill her father her entire adult life.

Bourgeois’ artistic practice is complex and diverse. Therefore, in order to better understand her art, particularly The Destruction of the Father, I turn to the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), who was interested in the creation of subjecthood and sexuality during early childhood and its resulting influence in adulthood. The three registers (groups) of the unconscious labeled the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real are central to Lacan’s theories. Each register relies on the others and explanations of the phenomena of each requires an

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9 Larratt-Smith, “Return of the Repressed,” 75.
understanding of all. The symbolic is concerned with the law, which refers not only to actual laws and rules, but also the codes, languages, symbols, etc. established in the world, a specific culture, and even a family order. The symbolic shapes the imaginary. An individual’s invented beliefs of the outside world are part of the imaginary register. The final register, the real, shapes the symbolic. The real is an individual’s first person experience with the world around him or her. A person’s daily lived experience is mediated through the expectations and guidelines generated in the imaginary and symbolic. Combined these registers control how an individual interacts, perceives, and interprets the world around them.¹¹

The three registers are integral to our understanding of three theoretical psychic events that occur in early childhood and have a profound impact on adulthood: the mirror stage, the Oedipal complex, and the libidinal economy. Subsequent chapters will reveal how Bourgeois’ progression through each of these stages gave rise to the artist’s desire to kill her father. However, a basic overview is necessary at this time to facilitate analysis of works presented before any psychoanalytic review of Bourgeois’ childhood. During Lacan’s mirror stage, the child glimpses at his or herself in the mirror and sees a whole figure which the infant identifies as him or herself. Prior to the mirror stage, the child only understood him or herself as disparate parts and fleeting wants and needs: a hand, a foot, hunger, disgust, exhaustion etc. The identification with the complete figure in the mirror brings about a revelation of agency in the child. Lacan asserts that this perception of subjectivity is a fantasy. The complete child in the mirror is non-existent – it is just a reflection of the fragmented child (it is an imaginary expectation of the world). The sense of wholeness in the mirror is an unobtainable goal (the real

inhibits the imaginary). As such, for the remainder of his or her life, the child feels deprived and looks for something to provide this impossible fulfillment.\textsuperscript{12}

The Oedipal complex, as described by Sigmund Freud, provides an object, the phallus, for the child’s quest. Freud’s basic theory relies on the relationship between child, mother, and father. Lacan’s theory is similar to Freud’s original concept, but Lacan expands it by broadening the concepts of mother and father to maternal figure and paternal figure respectively. In Lacan’s refiguration, the actual mother and father did not necessarily have to be present for the Oedipal complex to occur. Instead, other figures or ideas could stand in as the maternal or paternal figure.

According to Freud and subsequently Lacan, the child experiences frustration over the inconsistent presence of the mother. The child senses that something continuously pulls the mother away and determines that the rival is the father. The father represents order and discipline (the embodiment of the symbolic). The father’s power over the mother is represented by the phallus. The child wants the phallus and the power. As a result, the child aligns with the father (the symbolic order) in order to satisfy their longing.\textsuperscript{13}

Lacan’s mirror stage already established that wholeness is impossible. Therefore, the child’s alignment with the father and the symbolic order fails to provide satisfaction. During the libidinal economy, this desire for completeness (part of the imaginary) becomes enmeshed with the symbolic. As a result, the symbolic order diverts desire through the satisfaction of more primary wants and needs, creating drives. Fulfillment of drives supplies momentary gratification for the child, but ultimately the pleasure subsides and the cycle begins again.\textsuperscript{14}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{12} Rose, “Introduction-II,” 30.
\textsuperscript{13} Rose, “Introduction-II,” 31-39.
\textsuperscript{14} Rose, “Introduction-II,” 34.
\end{flushleft}
Psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious links Bourgeois’ artistic practice and *Fight Club*. *Fight Club* is not the first film (or the last) to explore the uncontrollable nature of the mind. From films like Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) to Darren Aronofsky’s *Black Swan* (2010), Hollywood writers and directors have used the violent and sexual nature of the unconscious to create intense psychological mysteries. Common among these films is a lead character unable to cope with reality or trauma. Unknowingly, he or she creates an alternate personality to fulfill desires previously repressed by mainstream society. Ultimately, the alter-ego consumes the character and the movie typically ends with his or her death, institutionalization, or destruction of the world. The characters’ obsessive drives links these films to Bourgeois’ work. Like these characters, Bourgeois cannot control the urge to symbolically kill her father in her art. Therefore, by examining one of these films, *Fight Club*, it is possible to illustrate how unconscious fantasies and desires often manifest themselves in violent and aberrant behavior.

At the beginning of *Fight Club*, the unnamed narrator expresses his frustration with the twentieth century. Living in a condo, working in a cubicle, and buying the entire Ikea catalog is not how he imagined adulthood would be – revealing a conflict between the imaginary and the real. The narrator’s restlessness manifests itself quite literally as chronic insomnia. After a number of unsuccessful attempts to cure his insomnia, the narrator meets Durden—an attractive and charming soap salesman. The two strike up an immediate friendship. The foundation of the friendship (and the film) is established in a pivotal scene.

**Narrator**: This is crazy. You want me to hit you?
**Durden**: That’s right.
**Narrator**: What? Like in the face?
**Durden**: (laughs) Surprise me.
Narrator: This is so fucking stupid.\(^{15}\) Despite this astute evaluation, the narrator nonetheless awkwardly punches Durden in the ear. Thrilled with the rush of pain, Durden punches the narrator in the stomach. The narrator, writhing in pain, asks Durden to punch him again and the scene ends with the two men happily beating each other up. The nightly fights become a ritual for the men. Eventually, they attract the attention of other men and form the eponymous fight club.\(^{16}\) The meetings grow and morph into Durden’s anarchist collective, Project Mayhem. The group begins to vandalize various symbols of capitalism, including corporate art, skyscrapers, and Starbucks. The narrator suspects that Durden is hiding something about Project Mayhem’s end goal. While searching for Project Mayhem’s true motives, the narrator learns the truth about Durden.

Narrator: (points to his body) I was here first.
Tyler: Who’s done more with it?\(^{17}\)

The narrator’s unconscious created Durden in order to carry out his desires and fantasies. While Bourgeois did not create a deranged and captivating alter-ego to fulfill her desires and fantasies, her artwork is a physical manifestation of her unconscious. Through a comparison of *Fight Club* and Bourgeois’ art practice, this thesis relies on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to bring to light the violent and uncontrollable nature of the unconscious.

In chapter one, I explore Bourgeois’ *The Destruction of the Father* with an examination of the basic narrative gleaned from the artist’s words obtained via interviews, artist statements, and diary entries. Bourgeois’ unique artistic process for *The Destruction of the Father* raises

\(^{15}\) *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher (20th Century Fox, 1999), DVD (2002).
\(^{16}\) First rule of Fight Club: You do not talk about Fight Club.
questions about the psychic impact of the work on the artist while she was making it. In the ensuing portion of the chapter, I survey the profuse amount of scholarly interpretations of *The Destruction of the Father*. This is a necessity because, despite the various authors’ own final assessments of the work, these scholarly interpretations all reveal a pattern of polarities within the work.\(^{18}\)

The second chapter looks at Bourgeois’ childhood, which is the origin of her fractured psyche. I assert the importance of the artist’s traumatic childhood, as it becomes a frequent manifestation in her artistic practice as an adult. Using Lacan’s theories of psychic development I demonstrate the areas where Bourgeois’ unconscious trapped or hindered her emotional growth. Lacanian psychoanalytic theory focuses primarily on the relationship between the child and father, which is methodologically crucial to understanding Bourgeois’ art practice. From her birth, Bourgeois was cast as both outsider and beloved. Bourgeois’ father constantly used these roles to antagonize and captivate his daughter. The artist’s relationship with her father is further complicated by his possessive behavior towards her and his overall sexual behavior, which manifested in his flirtation and sexual promiscuity with women – something observed by Bourgeois as a child. Understanding how Bourgeois’ coped with the varying treatment of her father unmask how her unconscious desires and fantasies manifested themselves in her art.

In the final chapter, I return to *The Destruction of the Father* but from the perspective of Bourgeois’ tumultuous relationship with her father. I will look at works created after *The Destruction of the Father* and compare these works to the 1974 artwork thereby identifying their numerous similarities. Despite being more complex than *The Destruction of the Father*, they uncover Bourgeois’ continuing fascination with patricide.

\(^{18}\) Various art historians and critics have taken a special interest in Bourgeois’ work, including Deborah Wye, Mignon Nixon, Robert Storr, Marie-Laure Bernadac, and Hans-Ulrich Obrist.
The more recent artworks coupled with *The Destruction of the Father* will bring to light unconscious motivations necessitating the return to the artist’s painful relationship with her father. What does the artist gain emotionally by picking at the wounds left by her father? Although many scholars believe Bourgeois’ art is meant to heal these wounds, I believe Bourgeois is constantly returning to the imagined murder of her father in order to experience some sort of erotic pleasure – the final stage of Lacanian maturation. Through interpretations of Bourgeois’ obsessive fantasy and behavior through the writings of Lacan, I posit this pleasure prevents Bourgeois’ futile attempts to murder her father.

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19 This erotic pleasure is established during the libidinal economy, which will be discussed in detail in chapter three.
CHAPTER II
I AM LOUISE’S MACABRE BUTCHERY

The beginning of *Fight Club* is actually the end of the narrator’s journey. Pantless, bloody, beaten, and with a gun to his head, he recounts how he met Tyler Durden. Since the narrator’s voice is present through the entire film, this scene serves as precedent for the film. In addition to telling the story of his relationship with Durden he also provides background commentary (via voice-overs) in most scenes. Furthermore, he actively breaks the fourth wall – speaking directly to the audience during scenes – and allows the audience to see his defense mechanisms and fantasies. The inner thoughts, fears, and desires of the narrator’s mind are integral to his story because Durden is an outgrowth of those same thoughts, fears, and desires. Durden is a part of the narrator. Therefore the narrator must reveal his mind’s inner workings to explain the creation of Durden and how they both ended up at the top of a building waiting for the city below to be razed to the ground.

Similar to *Fight Club*, Louise Bourgeois’ *The Destruction of the Father* begins at the end of the story. The viewer is confronted by a bizarre and terrifying stage of swelling round reddish-pink protrusions which enclose a table, overflowing with ambiguous, yet organic forms. Bourgeois describes the work as a family’s murderous and cannibalistic revenge on their tyrannical father. However, instead of re-creating an accurate figural representation of the story, Bourgeois chose to interpret the emotions experienced during the story. The abstract nature of the work makes it difficult to determine exactly what it represents, but according to

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20 Bernadac, *Bourgeois* (Flammarion), 115.
Deborah Wye, Bourgeois specialist and chief curator emerita at the Museum of Modern Art, the work is meant to create feelings of unease within viewers.²² Despite being life-size, the abundance of the strange amorphous mounds in the installation is intended to create a feeling of claustrophobia. Wye states that the overflowing “large globular protuberances” result in “a scene that closes in upon itself with the evocation of frightening claustrophobia.”²³ Adding to the horror, scattered animal limbs are visible on the central plateau. Created by casting meat bought at the Washington Meat Market in New York City, the animal remains add a “realistic and macabre touch to the otherwise abstracted environment.”²⁴ According to Wye, the elements of this piece are meant to generate “feelings of imprisonment, violence, and claustrophobia” which are central elements to the narrative of The Destruction of the Father. By emphasizing the emotions of the narrative, Bourgeois created a psychologically universal piece that encourages varying, and sometimes contradictory, interpretations.

The Destruction of the Father presents the murder of a domineering father at the hands of his family. Bourgeois provided various versions of the story but the basic elements remain the same.²⁵ A cruel, negligent, and narcissistic father sits at the dinner table (represented by the central platform in the art work) with his wife and children.²⁶ The father is engaged in his daily ritual of boasting. He brags about the various conquests of the day and his overall quality of greatness. The children are no longer able to cope with this verbal aggrandizement and his abusive nature. So, they grab him, throw him on the table, dismember him, and eat him (the
animal limbs on the platform represent the remains of the father). The mother’s role in this family drama varies from story to story. In one version, the mother “attempts to appease her husband, the tyrant.”27 In another, she is an active participant in the murder.28 Sometimes she is not even mentioned.29 The inconsistent presence of the mother possibly speaks to Bourgeois’ ambiguous relationship with her own mother, a relationship which is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this current paper.

In “Contending with the Father: Louise Bourgeois and her Aesthetics of Reparation,” American studies scholar Elisabeth Bronfen notes a disconnect between Bourgeois’ narrative and the scene in front of the viewer. Bourgeois’ tale focuses on the act of murder and cannibalism. In all three versions of the story, she vividly describes the actions of the children. Bronfen points out this is not what the viewer witnesses: “What we see, encased in the dark box, is the crime scene, not a re-enactment of the crime itself.”30 Additionally, Bourgeois does not create a literal depiction of the scene but rather evokes the anxiety and rage through abstract forms. Bronfen maintains that this reveals Bourgeois’ conscious attempt to represent “the paternal aggression at the heart of her lived fantasy.”31 Her choice of the phrase “lived fantasy” is no accident. Bourgeois repeatedly stated that even though the physical murder of her father did not take place, in her mind, it occurred in the process of creating the work. In an interview with art historian Donald Kuspit in 1988, Bourgeois asserts The Destruction of the Father “is a fantasy, but sometimes fantasy is lived.”32 Bourgeois continues “the recall was so strong, and it was such a

27 Bernadac, Bourgeois (Flammarion), 115.
28 Bourgeois, “Donald Kuspit,” 158.
32 Bourgeois, “Donald Kuspit,” 158.
lot of work, that I felt like a different person. I felt as if it had existed.”

Therefore, the artist’s process of art making was just as important as the art object.

The artistic process has long been important to Bourgeois. She did not create a work out of the blue. Her art always originated in her writings. For instance, in 1947 Bourgeois published *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* – a collection of short stories based on themes of loneliness and anguish. Adjacent to the texts, there was an accompanying print. Similar to the imagery of *The Destruction of the Father*, the prints were not illustrations of the stories but rather personifications of the central themes of the texts. Most of the images contain tall vertical structures (Figures 3 and 4). Art historian and Tate Modern director Frances Morris, noted that the images bear resemblances to the artist’s first sculptural series, *Personages*, which was exhibited in 1950 (Figure 5). The prints and the sculptures share a feeling of isolation. Even though the figures use the same space as other figures there is little to no interaction between them. Morris also notes similarities between the engravings and later sculptural works. Plate 10 (Figure 6), for instance, represents an interior which foreshadows *Cell XXVI*, completed in 2003 (Figure 7).

After the death of her father in 1951, Bourgeois began psychoanalytic treatment. She continued to attend sessions off and on for thirty years. During her treatment, Bourgeois

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33 Bourgeois, “Donald Kuspit,” 158.
34 Bernadac, *Bourgeois* (Flammarion), 175.
36 Morris, “*He Disappeared into Complete Silence 1947,*” 154.
37 Morris, “*He Disappeared into Complete Silence 1947,*” 154.
38 Morris, “*He Disappeared into Complete Silence 1947,*” 154.

In her essay, Frances Morris made the connection between the prints and the cells. I selected plate 10 and Cell XXVI to visually support Morris’ statement.
documented her thoughts about therapy. In 2012, writer and curator Philip Larratt-Smith
published a collection of these psychoanalytic writings in a series called Return of the Repressed.
The artist’s writings range from 1952 (the first year of her treatment) to 2008. As a result of this
treatment, the artist developed a strong interest in the theories of psychoanalysis. This interest
extended beyond her life and into her artwork. Therefore, her writings often contain the elements
of later artwork, like The Destruction of the Father. Some of her writings refer to Bourgeois’
aggression towards her father:

If my father had been unsuccessful in his bad
behavior the way a foolish drunkard is we would have been glad
to help him...but my father was
not pitiful he had pleasure, unjustly, and did not pay for his lea
ving his family.40

Others reveal a perceived pleasure in the act of killing:

she talks with a hatchet—

when he talks it smells of semen—

when she talks or cleans it is a killing process.41

There are also writings that reference formal elements that later appear in The Destruction of the
Father:

wish to hang things
and see hanging things drawings of
hanging sheathes (whole series)
floating objects. drawings
of clouds—
in opposition to cave—42

40 Louise Bourgeois, Louise Bourgeois: Return of the Repressed, vol. 2, Psychoanalytic
Writings, the editors took great care to replicate Bourgeois’ original texts as they were written on
the page. The spacing and sentence breaks are unique to Bourgeois’ writing, so I chose to keep
them in virtually the same format as they are seen in the text.
41 Bourgeois, Psychoanalytic Writings, 48.
The reference to the cave calls to mind the dark and recessed quality of *The Destruction of the Father*. And the “hanging things” and “floating objects” juxtaposed with the cave foreshadows the various hanging round forms in *The Destruction of the Father*. One passage anticipates the themes and ideas addressed in the work. Dated April 15, 1958, Bourgeois discusses her desire to leave her husband, art historian and Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Robert Goldwater, and return to her deceased father. Additionally, she recalls a morbid and cannibalistic fantasy:

VI/ I am afraid that my mother will abandon me
because I am going to steal her husband – but silly you I am not going
to love him I simply want to
steal him, to dispossess him, and I will come back to you
Both of us we are going to steal him, we
are going to eat him.

This cannibalistic fantasy would later become a “lived fantasy” when the artist created *The Destruction of the Father*. It is words turned to reality.

Bourgeois consistently stated that she was not concerned with sculptural materials and that they were just a “a simple means of expression and not an end in itself.” If you look at her oeuvre, it is clear that she was not bound to a single medium. From Carrara marble to old clothes, she moved fluidly between a variety of sculptural materials. While Bourgeois certainly holds no “Romantic [sic] associations” with any material, her choice of medium for a work is

42 Bourgeois, *Psychoanalytic Writings*, 55. See note above regarding spacing and sentence breaks of the text pulled from Bourgeois’ writing.
44 Bourgeois, *Psychoanalytic Writings*, 78.
45 Bourgeois, *Psychoanalytic Writings*, 78. In this statement, Bourgeois uses the present tense to convey the fear of her mother’s abandonment. At the time Bourgeois wrote this statement, her mother had been dead for over twenty-five years. Her use of the present tense here could possibly convey the return of the artist’s internal thought processes to a childhood state. This would fit with the narrative of *The Destruction of the Father*, which represents a moment in Bourgeois’ childhood reimagined over fifty years later.
46 Bernadac, *Bourgeois* (Flammarion), 95.
almost as important as the idea behind the work. Symbolically, the sculptural materials Bourgeois used exist in two categories: destructive and restorative. The first, destructive, refers to Bourgeois’ stone and wood sculptures. Besides the subtractive qualities of the stone and wood mediums, Bourgeois also used terminology like “aggressive,” “attacking,” “conquering,” and “cutting away” emphasizing this idea of removal. According to Bourgeois scholar Marie Laure-Bernadac, Bourgeois used marble as a stand in for herself and when she “hack[s] away” at the stone, she is also “hacking away at herself.” Marble represented the opportunity to create something new through aggressive destruction. This idea is made literal in *Femme Couteau (Knife Woman)* (1969-70) (Figure 8). According to the artist, “This marble sculpture – my *Femme Couteau* – embodies the polarity of woman, the destructive and seductive… In *Femme Couteau*, the woman turns into a blade, she is defensive.” Bourgeois carved out of the hard pink marble a soft and curvaceous female body. The undulating curves of the body come together to form a sharp dagger at the top. According to Ann Coxon, assistant curator at the Tate Modern, the soft texture and color invite the viewer to touch the work. However, the pointed tip of the knife asserts the opposite. Like Man Ray’s *Le Violon d’Ingres* (Figure 9), *Femme Couteau* creates a female figure as an object. However, each artist chose different objects, which reveals their different motives. Man Ray represented woman as a musical instrument – an object used by man to create beauty and pleasure. However, Bourgeois portrayed woman as a knife – a weapon used to hurt. Combining the soft texture and flowing

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47 Bernadac, *Bourgeois* (Flammarion), 95.
48 Bernadac, *Bourgeois* (Flammarion), 95.
49 Bernadac, *Bourgeois* (Flammarion), 126.
51 Later versions of *Femme Couteau* become less abstract and more pointed.
52 Coxon, “*Femme Couteau*,” 138.
53 The obvious sexist implication being that woman is meant only for male (hetero)sexual pleasure and enjoyment.
curves with the sharp dagger point, Bourgeois created a woman who is at once beautiful and dangerous.\textsuperscript{54}

The second category, restorative, appears in Bourgeois’ plaster and latex sculptures. Unlike stone and wood, latex and plaster require accumulation of material.\textsuperscript{55} Bourgeois claimed that the softer materials and additive process – as seen in her assemblages – relied on “restoration and reparation.”\textsuperscript{56} Bernadac believes that like marble, plaster and latex also represented Bourgeois.\textsuperscript{57} Instead of destruction and annihilation, Bourgeois used the softer materials in order to make herself whole again.\textsuperscript{58} The artist’s use of plaster and latex in \textit{The Destruction of the Father} creates a strange contradiction. She asserted that the theme of the work is destruction and revenge but her use of “restorative and reparative” materials contradicts this theme by her own admission, reinforcing the symbolic nature of the materials.

The presence of such a contradiction is not new for Bourgeois and she viewed this kind of contradiction as an artistic manifestation of her own inner turmoil. She stated: “It’s a polarity between the tenderness that I express and the violence that is inside me.”\textsuperscript{59} In various interviews, the artist noted that she achieved a sense of peace after she completed a work and claimed that she felt all of her anxieties were eradicated upon completing \textit{The Destruction of the Father}.\textsuperscript{60} In

\textsuperscript{54} There is no concrete evidence to support the idea that Bourgeois was referencing Man Ray’s work directly. However, given her friendship with Marcel Duchamp (a close friend of Man Ray) and the status of her art historian husband in the art world, Bourgeois was aware of Man Ray’s work as well as the countless other works throughout the history of twentieth-century art that represent the female form as various inanimate objects meant only for heterosexual male sexual pleasure.

\textsuperscript{55} Bernadac, \textit{Bourgeois} (Flammarion), 95.

\textsuperscript{56} Bourgeois, “Meanings, Materials, and Milieu,” 142.

\textsuperscript{57} Bernadac, \textit{Bourgeois} (Flammarion), 126.

\textsuperscript{58} Bernadac, \textit{Bourgeois} (Flammarion), 126.


\textsuperscript{60} Bourgeois, “Meanings, Materials, and Milieu,” 142.
other interviews Bourgeois discussed that she never achieves true peace: “The resolution never appears; it’s like a mirage. I do not get the satisfaction—otherwise I would stop and be happy.” Bourgeois’ attempts at resolution and wholeness is at odds with her desire to repair and restore. Ultimately, *The Destruction of the Father* is an inner turmoil materialized as a series of contradictions between male and female, pleasure and pain, and revulsion and desire.

*The Destruction of the Father* moves between obvious polarities that increase the tension of the work. These polarities, male and female, pleasure and pain, and revulsion and desire were not new themes for Bourgeois when she began *The Destruction of the Father* in 1974. The similarity – actually vagueness – between male and female sexual organs was a constant characteristic of Bourgeois’ sculptures of the 1960s. These sculptures are a bizarre assembly of forms that merge and split which change depending on the audience’s view of the sculpture. When *Janus Fleuri* of 1968 (Figure 10) is viewed frontally, two appendages are joined by a bizarre organic mass that simultaneously resembles a fungal growth, the innards of an animal, or a rock formation. The rough organic quality of the center is set off by the symmetry and smoothness of the appendages. The overall shape of the sculpture is reminiscent of a human pelvic bone. While the amorphous center obscures any definitive identification of gender, the various crevices do call to mind female sexual anatomy. Conversely, the appendages resemble the tip of a penis. The sculpture is suspended; as such, the viewer is able to walk around the sculpture and even look underneath it. When seen from either side, the visible appendage appears active and pushing through the fleshy material of the center portion. This calls to mind the sexual act of penetration and further enmeshes the image of a converging male and female form.

Reinforcing the importance of earlier art, the large protuberances in *The Destruction of the* 

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61 Bourgeois, “Donald Kuspit,” 162.
Father are similar to the appendages of Janus Fleuri. Like the appendages, they protrude from a soft and amorphous region. Bourgeois varied the height of the protuberances in The Destruction of the Father implying various stages of development in these structures. These forms are not inherently male or female: the soft, flesh colored dome-like forms recall the sexual organs in the male or female body. Behind the center of the table in The Destruction of the Father, two large round forms resemble breasts, buttocks, and testicles. Between these two structures Bourgeois placed a smaller, more oblong form. The placement of this form calls to mind the male anatomy but the obvious size differences between these forms adds a subversive layer of humor. The difference in size between the phallic-like form and the rounded forms could possibly be a commentary on the supposed power of the phallus. Bourgeois commented on this idea in reference to her 1968 work Fillette (Figure 11). Although the sculpture looks like a penis, the title translates as “little girl”—contrary to its phallic representation. When asked about the contradiction of title and form, Bourgeois referred to the work as an infant. “When I carry a little phallus like that in my arms, well, it seems like a nice little object, it’s certainly not an object I would wish to harm, that’s clear.” The diminutive size of the small pink protrusion between the two large breast like spheres could be viewed in a similar way. The protrusion is the tiny phallus that must be protected and held. This interpretation adds to the narrative of The Destruction of the Father, which focuses on the savage killing of a male figure of power. On the one hand, Bourgeois is commenting on the fragile sense of power held by a man. According to Lacan, the construction of identity is simultaneous with the construction of sexuality. In Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école Freudinne, Lacan scholar and psychoanalysis theorist, Jacqueline Rose analyzes Lacan’s theories on the formation of identity. Rose asserts that identity

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62 Bernadac, Bourgeois (Flammarion), 107.
rests on the supposed power of the phallus. Through indoctrination of the symbolic order, a child learns that having a penis means having power. As a result, the female child believes satisfaction is only achieved by having a penis. Conversely, the male child believes that he will lose his penis or more accurately the power associated with having a penis. According to Rose, male fear occurs because “having” implies a corollary state of “not having” (confirmed by the presence of women). To overcome this insecurity, males attempt to assert the power of the phallus and their right to that power. Given Bourgeois’ vast knowledge of psychoanalytic theory, it is likely her statement about Fillette is a reference to that sense of male insecurity. This interpretation implies that most men should be coddled. This is not the case in The Destruction of the Father. The children do not indulge and appease the father – they violently revolt. The idea of comforting the phallic figure is antithetical to their actions. On the other hand, a second interpretation of The Destruction of the Father refers to the idea of castrating the father to disinvest him of his power. As the children kill and consume him, they begin to assume his power, and begin to venerate that power. Some scholars interpret the table of The Destruction of the Father as an altar. Thus the placement of the three forms discussed above would make sense in a worship context. If we use this interpretation, the formal and narrative elements appear to work together rather than against each other.

In many of her works, Bourgeois constructs partially dismembered figures and positions them in such a way that it is difficult to determine if they are experiencing pleasure or pain. The

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64 Rose, “Introduction-II,” 40.
66 Unrelated to the scope of this paper, Marie-Laure Bernadac argues against a psychoanalytic approach to Fillette. Bernadac believes that the sincerity of Bourgeois’ quote is undermined by the artist’s sense of humor. She cites the “mocking gaze” in Robert Mapplethorpe’s famous photo of Bourgeois holding Fillette as evidence. Bernadac, Bourgeois (Flammarion), 107.
67 Including Deborah Wye, Elisabeth Bronfen, and Marie-Laure Bernadac.
68 Bernadac, Bourgeois (Flammarion), 113.
most obvious example of this confusion appears in Bourgeois’ sculpture *Arch of Hysteria* (Figure 11). A suspended gold figure arches back in an impossible pose. Its arms curve behind it reaching for its feet. The body of the figure appears male but any identifiable sexual anatomy was removed.⁶⁹

A similar arched figure first appeared in *Cell III* (Figure 12) placed below the sharp blade of a paper cutter. *Cell III* is the third in a series from the 1990s entitled *Cells*, which are large-scale installations usually the size of a small room or closet. They typically contain a combination of found or readymade objects and original pieces made by the artist. Despite their ability to stand-alone as artistic installations, together they can form a larger narrative.⁷⁰ They usually include objects or imagery from past sculptures, installations, drawings, etc., which connect them to the artist’s previous works. Bernadac interprets the *Cells* as “life-size reconstructions of childhood feelings.”⁷¹ She continues, “The *Cells* whether round or square allow her [Bourgeois] to pile up symbolic objects, gather scraps of memory, assemble the eternal protagonists of the family drama.”⁷² The original set of *Cells, I* through *VI*, were created in 1991, but Bourgeois continued to make the installations throughout the 1990s. When *Cell III* was installed at the Carnegie International in 1991, the arched figure was clearly female and the arch of the back was not as intense, but the same basic principle and theme of the figure applies to both sculptures. In the exhibition catalogue for the Carnegie International in regards to *Cell III* Bourgeois stated:

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⁶⁹ The identification of a male is correct as Bourgeois’ assistant, Jerry Gorovoy, was the model for it.
⁷⁰ Bernadac, *Bourgeois* (Flammarion), 135.
⁷¹ Bernadac, *Bourgeois* (Flammarion), 133.
⁷² Bernadac, *Bourgeois* (Flammarion), 133.
The *Cell* with the figure or arch of hysteria deals with emotional and psychological pain. Here is the arch of hysteria, pleasure and pain are merged in a state of happiness. Her arch—the mounting of tension and the release of tension is sexual.\(^{73}\)

For Bourgeois, the arch of the back could represent pleasure and pain. *Arch of Hysteria* and *Cell III* reveal, in the artist’s mind, that the positions related to pain are similar to the positions related to pleasure often making it difficult to distinguish between the two.\(^{74}\) *The Destruction of the Father* reveals that for Bourgeois pleasure and pain were psychologically interconnected. In one description of the 1974 installation, Bourgeois stated:

> The sculpture represents both a table and a bed. When you come into a room, you see the table, but also, upstairs in the parent’s room, is the bed. Those two things count in one’s erotic life: dinner table and bed. The table where your parents made you suffer. And the bed where you lie with your husband, where your children were born and you will die.\(^{75}\)

Bourgeois’ connection of the pain she suffered at family dinners and the sexual pleasure of the bedroom contextualize *Arch of Hysteria*. For Bourgeois, pleasure and pain are not opposites, but actually enhance each other.

> At a very young age, Bourgeois was aware that her birth was a disappointment: her father, Louis Bourgeois, wanted a son; her mother, Josephine, was distressed because her husband was disappointed by the birth of another daughter.\(^{76}\) But the parental dissatisfaction of her father (and up to a point her mother) was complicated by her resemblance, in look and attitude, towards Louis. Bourgeois’ father would alternate between praise of his daughter’s accomplishments and dismissal of these achievements because of her gender.

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\(^{73}\) Louise Bourgeois, “*On Cells,*” in *Destruction*, 207.

\(^{74}\) While not wholly connected to the scope of this paper, the ambiguity between pain and pleasure calls to mind the ambiguity of sexual pleasure and religious fervor seen in Bernini’s *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. Bourgeois was fond of Bernini and his work and even created a sculpture in 1967, entitled *Homage to Bernini*, which was an abstract interpretation of the enveloping and overlapping drapery that appears in Bernini’s works.

\(^{75}\) Bourgeois, “*Statements 1979,*” 115-116.

\(^{76}\) Bourgeois, “Donald Kuspit,”163. Her older sister Henriette was born 4 to 5 years before Bourgeois, and a second sister who was born between them died shortly after birth.
Louis’ love/hate relationship with his daughter encouraged negative and hurtful behavior as a means of expressing love and desire. In a sculpture titled *She-Fox* (Figure 13), Bourgeois represents her mother as a fox. Bourgeois stated that her mother’s “patient, clever, calculating” nature reminded the artist of a fox.\(^77\) Below one of the fox’s paws is a small sculpture of Bourgeois, which is meant to represent the protective (as well as aggressive) nature of the fox.\(^78\) The fox’s head was decapitated and her throat cut. According to Bourgeois, this violence was purposely done by the artist herself, the person the fox is protecting: “So I would try to hurt her, and this time I did. I cut her head off. I slit her throat. Still, I expect her to like me. The tragedy is: Is a person who I have treated like this still going to like me?”\(^79\) This behavior and response is typical of Bourgeois who had a history of acting out against family and friends in life and art.\(^80\) The sculpture conveys this behavior and represents Bourgeois’ complicated relationship with her mother.

Bourgeois’ relationship with her mother was based on admiration for her mother’s patient, calm, and logical demeanor, the polar opposite of her second daughter.\(^81\) Bourgeois spent most of her childhood attempting to prove that she was useful and therefore worthy of affection. This was complicated by the introduction of Sadie, her father’s mistress. The English governess joined the family when Bourgeois was around ten to teach the artist and her brother English. At some point during the artist’s English language studies, Louis and Sadie started an affair that lasted ten years. Since Sadie’s original role was governess she lived with the family, but after her sexual relationship began with Louis and Sadie’s role changed from governess to mistress she

\(^{77}\) Bernadac, *Bourgeois* (Flammarion), 122.

\(^{78}\) The figure representing Bourgeois was taken from a previous sculpture, *Fallen Woman* (1981). Bernadac, *Bourgeois* (Flammarion), 122.

\(^{79}\) Bernadac, *Bourgeois* (Flammarion), 122.

\(^{80}\) Bernadac, *Bourgeois* (Flammarion), 177.

\(^{81}\) Bourgeois, “Meanings, Materials, and Milieu,” 140.
continued to live with the family. Bourgeois’ admiration of her mother’s patience turned to anger at her constant self-imposed blindness at her husband’s infidelities. Additionally, Josephine turned Louise into a spy and forced her to “keep track” of Louis and report on the relationship to Josephine. Bourgeois believed in her mother’s strength and resilience and desired her respect. Concurrently, she was disgusted and enraged at her mother’s role in her painful childhood.

As previously stated, The Destruction of the Father represents Bourgeois’ relationship with her father. Bourgeois harbored a great resentment towards her father. At the same time, given their similar personalities, she desperately wanted Louis’ approval and acceptance. Louis constantly mocked his daughter’s gender to friends and family. He pointed to the artist’s accomplishments commenting “too bad she is a girl” and “she is not a son, only a daughter.” Louis’ treatment created an inner turmoil within his daughter. She knew those comments were unfair and that it was not her fault that she was the third daughter and not the long expected son. At the same time, she constantly strove to find a way for her father to be truly proud of her without commenting on her gender.

Bourgeois’ symbolic register retained Louis’ disapproval in her unconscious. As a result, despite her physical subjectivity, her unconscious “symbolic” mental facility told Bourgeois that she was not enough as a female – it claimed she needed to be male in order to satisfy her father. Her male desire was not as much a longing for a penis as an acceptance of her achievements without the addendum of “for a woman.” Similarly, the same unconscious desire sparked the belief that if she was male, her father would unquestionably love her.

82 Louise Bourgeois, “Child Abuse,” in Destruction, 134.
84 Bernadac, Bourgeois (Flammarion), 140.
85 Bernadac, Bourgeois (Flammarion), 116.
In *The Destruction of the Father*, the children kill the father and eat him – a representation of consuming his paternal power. From murder, cannibalism, and the assumption of power, Bourgeois is silencing the voice that lives in the back of her head telling her she is not good enough because she is a woman. Additionally, this act of violence invigorates and gives her pleasure. Bourgeois states: “When I do not ‘attack’ I do not feel myself alive.” Influenced by the artist’s writings and earlier sculptures, *The Destruction of the Father* is a reflection of Bourgeois’ complicated feelings toward her father which originated early in her childhood. Additionally, the ideas developed in *The Destruction of the Father* would re-emerge time and time again in future artworks.
CHAPTER III
I AM LOUISE’S BROKEN CHILDHOOD

As *Fight Club* celebrates the repressed violence in contemporary society, it is easy to ignore the narrator’s romantic interest Marla Singer, portrayed by Helena Bonham-Carter. In terms of plot development and narrative, that is her primary function. However, when the viewer shifts the narrative of *Fight Club* to Marla’s perspective, you begin to empathize and understand her motives.

Before the narrator meets Tyler Durden, he attempts to cure his anxiety driven insomnia through other outlets. Initially, he tries to obtain sleeping pills from his doctor. His doctor refuses. Instead, he ends up attending a support group for testicular cancer after his doctor, glibly replies to the narrator’s repeated pleas: “You wanna see pain? Swing by First Methodist Tuesday nights. See the guys with testicular cancer. That’s pain.”

The narrator attends the support group and is initially hypercritical of the group’s honest and open emotions. However, in the middle of a hug with another group member, the narrator breaks down in tears. That night he sleeps like a baby. He begins to attend various support groups nightly. The narrator believes he finally found the solution to his problem. Enter Marla. The narrator’s disdain for Marla is clear in the following statement: “If I had a tumor I would name it Marla.” She is the antithesis of the

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86 *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher.
87 *Fight Club* is extremely sexist. It provides an accessible insight into the unconscious, but in *Fight Club* that unconscious treats women like objects, sees emotions (and communication) as a sign of weakness (i.e. femininity), believes violent rage is a sign of manhood, and perpetuates rape culture. The scope of the sexism (in all directions) cannot be covered in this thesis, but it also cannot be glossed over.
88 *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher.
89 *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher.
uptight, rule abiding, and emotionally frustrated narrator.\textsuperscript{90} Like the narrator, Marla is physically healthy (unlike all of the other members of the support groups).\textsuperscript{91} Unlike the narrator, Marla appears to be unaffected by the presence of another faker – someone who is not sick but attends disease support groups.\textsuperscript{92} Marla’s indifference at the narrator’s presence at the support groups seems to infuriate him more. Eventually, because of Durden and their fight club, the narrator stops attending the support groups. The next time Marla appears in the film, she creates conflict in the seemingly perfect relationship between the narrator and Durden. After spending her nights having extremely raucous sex with Durden, she would spend the next morning flirting and coming on to the narrator. The narrator is annoyed with Marla’s persistent invasion into his life. He is jealous of her relationship with Durden (and Durden’s relationship with her). Additionally, he adheres to the twentieth-century axiom of “bros before hoes” so he aggressively rebuffs Marla’s advances.\textsuperscript{93} This complex and confusing relationship is made more complicated as Marla continuously turns to the narrator for emotional support. As the narrator nears the truth about Durden – that he and Durden are the same person – Marla that confirms the narrator’s growing suspicions:

\textit{Narrator: What’s my name?}

\textsuperscript{90} Marla’s entrance is quite memorable. She arrives in a cloud of cigarette smoke at the testicular cancer support group, and un-phased by the clearly all men’s group says “This is cancer, right?”\textsuperscript{91} Since Marla is a secondary character, her reasons for attending the support groups are unclear. In a quiet moment with the narrator, they discuss how the people in the support group actually listen instead of just waiting for their turn to talk. Additionally, she is a rather macabre character, and attending disease support groups fits with her character’s obsession with death.\textsuperscript{92} \textit{Fight Club}, directed by David Fincher.

\textsuperscript{93} “Bros before hoes” is a phrase that came into popularity during the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century, which is around the same time that \textit{Fight Club} was released. It seemed fitting to use a concurrent expression to describe the narrator’s dilemma with Marla and Durden. The phrase essentially means that a man will never let a woman (the ho) come between him and a friend (the bro). This adage can apply to numerous heterosexual relationship scenarios. Here, the narrator will not engage with Marla because she is already in a sexual relationship with his friend.
Marla: Tyler Durden. Tyler Durden, you fucking creep.\textsuperscript{94} The narrator and audience’s realization Durden is the narrator’s alter-ego places Marla’s flirtations, sexual advances, and expectations of intimacy in a new light.

Re-imagining \textit{Fight Club} in this new light, Marla becomes a much more sympathetic character. Additionally, her actions are no longer irresponsible and cruel. They are the expected response of a woman in a confusing and emotionally abusive relationship. When the narrator calls Marla to verify Tyler’s identity, he starts the conversation asking if he (the narrator) and Marla had ever had sex. Marla is irritated and confused and replies with frustrated skepticism. After a comedic back and forth between the two Marla blurts out, “You fuck me, then you snub me. You love me, you hate me, you show me your sensitive side, you turn back into an asshole – Is that a pretty accurate description of this relationship?”\textsuperscript{95} Although Marla is a flawed character, she is one of the only sympathetic characters in the movie. In spite of her bizarre behavior and confrontational attitude, once the audience discovers the true nature of her relationship with the narrator (and Durden) she becomes reasonable, caring, and honest.

Like Marla, Bourgeois’ wish to confront and kill her father, Louis, feels logical when one examines their complicated relationship in more detail. The nature of their relationship was set at Bourgeois’ birth:

Of course, my father wanted a son. So I was an embarrassment when I was born. It is a fact. My mother, who, as I said, was very rational and a very cool person, my mother said to her husband, to my father: “Don’t be disappointed with that little girl. You know, she is your spitting image. Don’t you think so?” It was not clear that he thought so, but my father said, “Yes, she is pretty nice.” And my mother said, “She is your spitting image, and we are going to name her for you.” You see, my mother was trying to sell me to him. And she succeeded to an extent. But my father was still disappointed that he did not have a son.\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{94} \textit{Fight Club}, directed by David Fincher.
\textsuperscript{95} Uhls, “Fight Club,” 100.
\textsuperscript{96} Bourgeois, “Donald Kuspit,” 163.
As Bourgeois noted, she would spend her entire childhood attempting to be useful to her parents. For instance, at the age of nine she began to work for the family’s tapestry business as a draftsman (the individual who would sketch out the missing components of an antique tapestry as a guide for the weavers). Bourgeois’ motives were much deeper than learning the family trade:

...there is a more basic motivation. I was the third daughter of a man who wanted a son. So to survive I had to create ways of making myself likable. It was the only way of escaping the depression which came from feeling superfluous – from feeling abandoned.

The latter reveals that Bourgeois would fulfill her mother’s expectations as well as appear as her father’s spitting image. In other words, Bourgeois would model her father not only in looks but also personality. It appears much of this has to do with her mother Josephine, promoting the father-daughter relationship while Bourgeois was quite young. When the artist’s father joined the French army during World War I, this caused Josephine stress and brought turmoil to their relationship. As a result, Josephine followed her husband around France. Eventually, Louis was injured and sent to a hospital in Chartres and Josephine took up residence until he recovered. She brought along Bourgeois (then about three or four) with her. The other children, Henriette and younger brother Pierre, were left at home with their grandparents. Bourgeois modeled her

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97 “Entire” may seem like an exaggeration, but it is not. For instance, several years after she started working at the family business, she voluntarily left school to work full time at the shop. Additionally, she actively helped her mother cover up her bad health – Josephine contracted the Spanish Flu in 1918 – from Louis.
100 Louise Bourgeois: the Spider, and the Tangerine.
father in personality too, something that Louis actively promoted. Art historian Donald Kuspit states that despite Louis and Bourgeois’ complicated relationship “Bourgeois was a favorite, perhaps even spoiled child.” Bourgeois was aware of Louis’ favoritism:

A daughter is a disappointment. If you bring a daughter into this world, you have to be forgiven, the way my mother was forgiven because I was the spitting image of my father. That was my first piece of luck. It may be why he treated me like the son he always wanted.

Interestingly, Louis eventually had the long desired son. Despite Bourgeois’ young age, Pierre’s birth in 1913 seems one of her first unconscious realizations about her place within the family and the necessity she felt to remain crucial to her parents. At the time of Pierre’s birth, Bourgeois was around twelve to eighteen months old. According to Josephine (as told by the artist during an interview), Bourgeois was still crawling. However, when she was introduced to her baby brother, she pulled herself up and began walking. Jacques Lacan scholar and psychoanalytic theorist Juliet Mitchell identifies this as a pivotal moment in Bourgeois’ childhood. Driven by jealousy about losing her station as the baby boy, Bourgeois literally and figuratively pulled herself up. According to Mitchell, she “toddled away from infancy to childhood.” Bourgeois’ age and her reaction to Pierre’s birth resonates with Lacan’s articulation of the mirror stage. The mirror stage is derived from Lacan’s metaphor of a child recognizing him or herself in a mirror. Following neonatal helplessness, it usually occurs around six to eighteen months and is responsible for the development of the ego, “I” subject. In the

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103 Bernadac, Bourgeois (Flammarion), 115.
104 In interviews, Bourgeois makes it very clear that she did not like either of her siblings (or her cousins) as a child and was quite cruel to them, Pierre in particular. This is one of many things that caused her immense guilt as an adult.
mirror metaphor, the young helpless infant (or neonate) sees his or her reflection in the mirror as a whole subject (*imago-gestalto*), which contradicts his or her own experience with the uncontrollable and fragmented body.108 This disparity is met with anxiety in the underdeveloped mind of the child. In order to reconcile this disparity (and anxiety), the child unconsciously chooses to identify with the *imago-gestalto* visible in the mirror. However, this identification is a fantasy.109 The child imagined that this figure in the mirror is complete and whole and by identifying with it the child believes that such completeness and unity is possible in life. Since such wholeness is impossible, the child spends the rest of his or her life trying to achieve the impossible. Since Lacan uses the mirror as a metaphor, it is not a requirement for completion of this stage – an event that causes anxiety in the child about their own identity and forces them to choose a fantasy of wholeness over his or her own fragmented reality could serve as the mirror stage.110 Instead of seeing a whole version of herself in the mirror, Bourgeois recognizes a more helpless version of a new and doted upon baby. Then to prove her wholeness (in her mind, worth), the toddler Bourgeois starts walking. Unfortunately, this drive for a sense of worth, like a sense of wholeness, is a fantasy and unattainable. Bourgeois spent her entire life trying to prove her worth to her father (even after his death in 1951) and she never seemed to meet the unrealistic expectations that she and her father had set up in her mind.

The complexity of Louise Bourgeois’ relationship with her father is immediately evident and palpable in her art. Despite her gender, Bourgeois fulfilled Louis’ expectations of a son. Even so, her achievements were consistently undermined by her father. Louis’ influence on his daughter can again be conceptualized by Lacanian theory. As previously noted, the Oedipal

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complex, for Freud, included the father, the mother and the child. Lacan broadened and reconceptualized Freud’s theory. In Lacan’s Oedipal complex, the three main participants are the child, the maternal figure, and the paternal figure. Unlike Freud, the actual mother and father did not have to be physically present in Lacan’s interpretation. Instead, it is possible for other figures or even concepts to stand in place for the mother and the father. The Oedipal complex sheds light on the basic triad of Bourgeois, Josephine, and Louis.

According to Lacan, the maternal figure is the infant’s primary source of contact with the Real, which is the child’s actual lived experience. However, the mother is not always there and this causes anxiety in the child. In order to control the mother’s presence, the child attempts to learn what is drawing the mother away.\footnote{Juliet Mitchell, “Introduction-I” in \textit{Feminine Sexuality}, 6-7.} The child discovers through the paternal figure that what the mother wants is the paternal figure. From there the child endeavors to find out what makes the father so special to garner the mother’s attention. In Lacan’s theories of subjectivity, the object of the mother’s desire is the phallus.\footnote{Rose, “Introduction-II,” 38.} Lacan’s use of the term phallus does not necessarily refer to the penis. It is what the father has that the child does not. Although in some cases the male genitals could be the thing that the phallus comes to represent, the phallus is the thing that pulls the mother away from the child.\footnote{Rose, “Introduction-II,” 38.} Lacan states that this object or concept and the paternal figure represent the symbolic order, the rules and guidelines of culture and society. Therefore, in the paternal figure and the corollary phallus, the child sees that the father (for a lack of a better word) as representative of the symbolic order. In order to get what he or she wants (the mother’s attention) the child has to follow the father and the symbolic order.\footnote{Rose, “Introduction-II,” 38.}
Josephine’s reaction to Louis’ departure during World War I speaks to her strong adoration and affection for Louis. This sense of marital devotion is reinforced by her silent acquiescence to Louis’ live-in mistress, Sadie. Josephine’s adoration of Louis is confirmed by Bourgeois’ own statements: “In my mother’s eyes, he could do nothing wrong.”\textsuperscript{115} Her mother’s devotion to her father would have been very clear to Bourgeois at a very young age. Therefore, in Bourgeois’ mind, the only way to please her mother (the maternal figure) was to model herself after her father (the paternal figure). This initial Oedipal interpretation of othering within Bourgeois’ parental relationships is complicated by a more complex one including Bourgeois, her father, and the cultural expectations of male and female children.

In Bourgeois’ second symbolic infancy, Louis is not the paternal figure. Instead he is the maternal figure.\textsuperscript{116} As Bourgeois matures she begins to model her behavior after her father. However, instead of intense adoration of her father, she encounters one persistent and massive obstacle – she is female. Any praise directed at Bourgeois was always accompanied with a reminder that she was a daughter: the representative other beautifully depicted in the very simple artwork, \textit{Untitled} (1990) (Figure 14). \textit{Untitled} contains two tangerine peels: the first showing the exterior and the second the interior. Each tangerine peel is pinned to a board like a butterfly specimen. Although the peels curled and shrunk over time, their basic shape recalls the human form. In an interview with filmmaker Camille Guichard, Bourgeois recounted a game her father used to play with friends in the trenches during the war that he adapted into a psychological torture device for his middle child:

> With a knife you cut the shape of a woman in the peel—head, shoulders, breasts and belly—in such a way that the stem of the orange is where the “genitals” would be. So when you peel it everything opens out, and you have a figure with fine hair and

\textsuperscript{115} Bourgeois, “Statements 1979,” 113.
\textsuperscript{116} Something I am sure the macho Louis would find deeply insulting.
something dangling between the legs. My father would then say “Look, children, it’s wonderful, look what she has. This little figure is a portrait of my daughter. Not Henriette, Louise—but Louise has nothing, there!”

This mortifying childhood memory is one of many examples of her father’s ridicule of Bourgeois’ gender. At her birth, a boy was expected, but a girl could not carry on the family name. Louis felt a daughter was weak and a mistake. In this second reading of Bourgeois’ infant othering, the paternal figure becomes Louis’ expectations of a son. For Bourgeois, having a penis (a phallus) represented the symbolic order. A penis was not only accepted by her father, but praised. Her lack of a penis prevented her from her father’s undivided love and attention. In Nature Study (1984) (Figure 15), Bourgeois exacts her revenge on her father’s ridicule and attack of her femininity. Bizarrely, a headless animal with three pairs of breasts sits atop a pedestal. It visibly lacks genitals and depicts no clear determination of biological sex. A tail curls up on its stomach under its leg, which does seem to reference a penis. According to Bourgeois, Nature Study is about her father: “Since I was demolished by my father, why shouldn’t I demolish him? I take a really masculine animal and I give him breasts, in ridicule. And after having given him breasts, why not give him a second pair of breasts? And then I cut off his head. It’s a way of teasing. As I was teased, so shall I tease.” Bourgeois turned her father into a sexless, effeminate, and weak (beheaded) animal. She teases him the way he ridiculed her for her gender. Once again through making art, Bourgeois symbolically killed and even castrated her father.

117 Bernadac, Bourgeois (Flammarion), 203. As recounted in Marie Laure-Bernadac’s text Louise Bourgeois.
118 Interestingly, Bourgeois was the only one of her siblings to have children: three boys. And as adults, all three boys changed their last name to Bourgeois, thus guaranteeing Louis’ heritage.
119 Bernadac, Bourgeois (Flammarion), 116.
120 Bernadac, Bourgeois (Flammarion), 120-122.
121 Bernadac, Bourgeois (Flammarion), 120-122.
this instance, she robbed him of a virility he always hoped to pass on to a son. She takes away Louis’ sense of power.

The introduction of Sadie complicated Bourgeois childhood even more. In this final Oedipal reading of Bourgeois’ psychology, the triad between Bourgeois, her father and Sadie is certainly the most discussed, complex, and profound. This triad reinforces Louis’ repeated sexual objectification of women. Here, Louis returns to the role of the paternal figure while Sadie becomes the maternal figure thereby displacing Josephine. Initially, Bourgeois was taken with her new governess and Sadie reciprocated that affection. The artist found another sister (Sadie was not much older than Bourgeois’ sister, Henriette). Bourgeois never mentioned when the affair between Sadie and her father began or when she discovered it, but it clearly upset her. Returning to the Oedipal complex, inserting Sadie as the maternal figure, Louis steals the governess away from his daughter. The phallus, like the previous Oedipal complex, is the penis: Louis’ genitals. However, the penis is no longer a social signifier of societal importance. Instead it reinforces Louis’ expectations of women: as sexual objects. This would have caused great distress in Bourgeois regarding gender and how her father possibly viewed the artist. While there is no evidence that Louis viewed or treated his daughter in any inappropriate sexual way, stories told by Bourgeois do reveal an element of eroticism to their relationship:

Why don’t you Walk like that Girl my father would say. You never took the trouble to learn How.

Elsewhere she said:

122 In 1982, Bourgeois shared, for the first time ever, the story of Sadie at her MoMA retrospective. After that, it became the lens through which people examined all of Bourgeois’ work. In the documentary, The Tangerine, the Mistress, and the Spider, Bourgeois’ long time assistant and friend, Jerry Gorovoy, expressed concern over art critics’ continued and intense fascination with Louis and Sadie’s affair. Gorovoy (correctly) asserts that Bourgeois’ work is much more complex than this one incident.
Don’t you ever look at yourself, why don’t you take the time to study yourself My father would say. He then would buy me a fur. I have given the fur away I used to hate every thing he bought me. I thought it always was show off and not of my type. It always was for a tramp. He wanted me to look like a tramp.\textsuperscript{123}

Louis’ overt sexuality caused extreme stress in his young daughter. This distress was expressed in Bourgeois’ adult life, in part, by her choice of spouse, Robert Goldwater. One of her favorite qualities about Goldwater was that he was nothing like her father.\textsuperscript{124} However, she constantly wrote in her diaries about the frustration she felt over her partner’s lack of emotional expression and attention, which was characteristic of her father.\textsuperscript{125}

In her art, the stress of Louis’ eroticism takes the form of a psychic fracture in Bourgeois’ identity. \textit{Twosome} (1991) (Figure 16) erotically personifies the push-pull relationship of Bourgeois’ and her father. \textit{Twosome} is made up of two large steel cylinders. The smaller cylinder sits on a small track that moves it in and out of the larger cylinder. The interior of the larger cylinder is lit red. Additionally, there are doors and windows cut into the larger cylinder which are meant to reference a home.\textsuperscript{126} The push-and-pull motion embodies Louis’ contradictory treatment of Bourgeois. It could also symbolizes Bourgeois’ feelings towards her father. She hates him for his constant abuse, but also wants his love. The repetitive in-and-out movement of the small cylinder generates obvious sexual connotations. But this same movement is also violent. Instead of a penis penetrating a vagina, the small cylinder becomes a metaphor for killing. It repeatedly stabs the larger red glowing cylinder. The multiple intertwining

\textsuperscript{123} Bourgeois, \textit{Psychoanalytic Writings}, 26.  
\textsuperscript{124} Bernadac, \textit{Bourgeois} (Flammarion), 189.  
\textsuperscript{125} Bourgeois, \textit{Psychoanalytic Writings}, 78.  
\textsuperscript{126} Bernadac, \textit{Bourgeois} (Flammarion), 137.
interpretations reference Bourgeois’ own confused desires and fantasies about her father.

Bourgeois returns to these same distressing desires and fantasies in her art time and time again.
CHAPTER IV
I AM LOUISE’S JOUISSANCE

In the spirit of an effective, charismatic, and totalitarian cult leader, Tyler Durden – alter-ego of the *Fight Club* narrator – reinforces his power through bombastic rhetoric effectively encouraging his anarchistic and dystopian ideology. In the film, one of the most popular maxims was, “You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You’re the same decaying matter as everything else.”

This statement provides a unique insight into the narrator’s wish for love via excessive attention and praise and his unconscious impetus to create his Lacanian subconscious Durden.

To understand the narrator’s creation of Durden and Louise Bourgeois’ repeated patricide, it is necessary to explore Jacques Lacan’s theories of desire. Before complete subjecthood at the end of the Oedipal complex, the Lacanian child encounters desire. Upon discovering the libidinal economy, the child attempts to satisfy these desires. Desire is demand minus need, which is tied with physical need. For instance, a child cries because he or she is hungry and the parent gives the child food to satisfy that need. Lacan believes that this biological need is accompanied by a demand for love.

Therefore, when the parent answers the demand for food, they are also telling the child, “I love you.” However, the parent is not always present. The parent’s inconsistent presence fails to fully satisfy the child’s secondary demand for love. For Lacan, desire is the part of the demand that is not satisfied when the need is satisfied. This process is made more complex as the parents begin to involve social education in this process. As the child grows, the parent enforces requirements in order for the need (food) to be met. For

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instance, when a toddler asks for food simply and bluntly, this request is usually met with “say please” or a similar manner-oriented phrase. Consequently, the child recognizes that for their need to be met, he/she has to follow the rules of the parent (who stands in as the enforcer of the symbolic order). This causes desire to become enmeshed with the symbolic order, the intersecting moment when drive enters. Consider the example again of the child asking for food: this is both a demand for food and love. As a result of the mirror stage gestalt or self-recognition, the child believes that there is a possibility for a whole self (which is a myth). Even though the child uses the socially appropriate way to ask for food and the need is met, the child feels unsatisfied because the secondary need, or desire, cannot be met. Therefore, there is a gap in the fulfillment for the child. The child does not know how to satisfy this imbalance. But believing balance is possible, the child asks for more food because desire became wrapped up in the demand for food. The drive is satisfied, but the desire is not.

Tyler’s snowflake metaphor – you are not beautiful or unique, you are decay – reveals that the narrator’s desire was to be more than “decaying matter”; the narrator wanted to be a “beautiful and unique snowflake.” His actions, thoughts, and creation of Tyler reveal the narrator’s desperate longing to be someone important and worshipped. He followed the rules of society for his entire life and still feels unfulfilled and purposeless. The narrator finds temporary fulfillment at the various disease support groups. One of the most telling quotes about the narrator occurs during such a support group. As the members of the testicular cancer group gather around the narrator for a group hug, the narrator says (via voice-over): “I wasn’t dying. I

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133 The narrator (in the book, script, and movie) is aptly unnamed, thus decreasing his value and importance.
wasn’t host to cancer or parasites; no I was the warm little center that the life of this world crowded around.”

Another physically healthy interloper, Marla, unfortunately encroaches on the narrator’s support group territory and as a result removes all enjoyment from the support groups. “With her there, I was a faker too.” On the surface, this comment implies that the narrator’s fear of being caught is increased by Marla’s presence. This is likely a part of his hostile reaction (as is his sexual attraction to Marla), but also with another faker present the narrator is no longer unique. It does not matter that Marla’s presence in the support groups likely did not affect the amount of attention the narrator received. All that mattered was that she was a physical reminder that he was not unique and did not deserve any of the special treatment he received at the support groups.

Durden emerges soon after Marla’s intrusion. The creation and presence of Durden creates two interconnected modes of satisfying the narrator’s desire for attention. Durden, as the narrator sees him, instantly understands and eloquently articulates the narrator’s angst. In discussing how unspecial their generation was Durden causes the narrator to feel special. Furthermore, Durden is compelling and magnetic and the narrator is pleased to be included in Durden’s inner circle. The narrator’s pleasure in Durden’s attention becomes clearer as the movie progresses. As time passes, Durden pays less and less attention to the narrator. A particularly telling clue of the narrator’s jealousy occurs when Durden shows preferential treatment to another member of Project Mayhem, Angel Face (named as such for his heavenly good looks and portrayed by Jared Leto). At the next fight club meeting, the narrator beats Angel Face until he is unrecognizable before eventually pulled off of him.

134 *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher.
135 *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher.
Durden is a physical manifestation of the narrator’s imaginary ideal of manhood. In Durden’s own words: “I look like you wanna look, I fuck like you wanna fuck, I am smart, capable, and most importantly, I am free in ways that you are not.”\textsuperscript{136} As Durden, people worship the narrator. He is mythologized across the country. He is a hero. However, Lacan noted that the wholeness and completeness, as promised by Durden, is a myth established in the mirror stage. Even though Durden brings the narrator all the attention and worship he desired, he is ultimately unsuccessful because he does not attain first person awareness. Despite being important and loved as Durden, the narrator’s anxieties and feelings of inadequacy still persist. If Durden was truly fulfilling, there would have been no fracture and the narrator would have become Durden completely. Instead, the narrator kills his alter-ego believing that he no longer needs Durden to be smart, capable and free. However, Durden is a part of the narrator’s unconscious and therefore uncontrollable. As the movie draws to a close, Durden surprises the audience with a split-second frame of male genitals. The quick flash of genitals on the screen recalls one of Durden’s original rebellions – working as a projectionist he would insert random frames of pornographic films into mainstream films.\textsuperscript{137} With this act of mischief, Durden lets the audience know that he is not dead.

Desire uniquely suits everyone, and for the narrator of \textit{Fight Club}, satisfaction was obtained through undivided attention and worship. Bourgeois desired attention and appreciation as well but from her father. Like the narrator, Bourgeois’ wish for fulfillment and wholeness is also unsuccessful. Bourgeois’ desire or fantasy manifests in her drive to kill her father. In \textit{The Destruction of the Father}, Bourgeois claims that the work was reparative and addressed her

\textsuperscript{136} \textit{Fight Club}, directed by David Fincher.
\textsuperscript{137} Tyler also exerts his presence before the narrator even meets. In several scenes at the beginning of the movie, the audience can see flashes of Durden much like the flash of genitals at the end of the movie.
anger towards her father. However, if we compare themes and symbols of *The Destruction of the Father* with Bourgeois’ later work *Cell (Arch of Hysteria)* (1993) (Figure 17), Bourgeois returns to this violent episode over and over because she seems to derive pleasure from the violence.

Despite hating her father, Bourgeois desperately wanted her father’s love. Psychoanalytic interpretation suggests this desire for love as sexual desire. With the artist, the desire for her father’s love was much deeper. From Bourgeois’ birth, she was told that she was her father’s spitting image – she looked like he looked. Both her parents actively shaped Bourgeois to be Louis’ heir. Bourgeois recognized the similarities between herself and her father, which made her simultaneously horrified and happy. She is horrified because she is aware of all the horrible things her father said and did. Bourgeois is upset that despite her father’s abuses, she wants his love. She is happy because she is heir and spitting image, but she is not a *male* reproduction. She is female. She never forgets her biological sex because Louis, with often repeated derision and denigration, would never let her. Bourgeois desires her father’s love. Because Lacan theorizes complete subjectivity is a myth, even if her father gave her the love and attention, she would still experience unfulfilled wholeness. According to Lacan, drives are satisfied by an unfulfilled desire. Drive obtains pleasure from failing to satisfy a desire, what Lacan calls *jouissance*. Bourgeois never obtains fulfillment from her father’s love and her unconscious takes from her father what it lacks. By murdering her father, Bourgeois is taking the power of the phallus from her father robbing him of his virility.

If Bourgeois’ artistic practice is part of her fantasy fulfillment, Sigmund Freud’s theory of sublimation suggests the impulse of the fantasy fulfillment is persistent. In *Theories of Sexuality*, Freud claimed sublimation “enables excessively strong excitations arising from

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139 Rose, “Introduction-II,” 34-35.
particular sources of sexuality to find an outlet and use in other fields…”\(^{140}\) Instead of acting out the literal fantasy to satisfy the impulse, Bourgeois diverts and satisfies the drive through other means. Freud notes that one common form of sublimation is the production of art. For Bourgeois, art served as a sufficient symbolic outlet for her desires fulfilling that which was not satisfied by her father. Recall Bourgeois’ words on the creation of *The Destruction of the Father*: “…the recall was so strong, and it was such a lot of work, that I felt like a different person. I felt as if it had existed.”\(^{141}\) Although Bourgeois did not actualize the murder of her father, the act of creating *The Destruction of the Father* satisfied the drive to kill her father and she repeated this murderous practice continuously throughout her career.

In *The Destruction of the Father*, Bourgeois merged together ideas that were normally viewed as contradictions: male and female, desire and revulsion, and pleasure and pain. This same fusion of polarities is visible in her *Cells* of the 1990s, particularly *Cell (Arch of Hysteria)*. *Cell (Arch of Hysteria)* was originally exhibited at the 1993 Venice Biennale. Unlike previous installations in the series, there was no door or window present. The viewer had to walk through a disturbing and precariously constructed corridor made of old doors and panels. Once inside the cell, the viewer was confronted by an intensely arched body on a metal framed bed. The bed linen contains the repeated phrase “*je t’aime*” (I love you) embroidered in red. As viewers turn left, they encounter a large band saw. Bourgeois referred to the piece as a psychodrama, one that, according to Bernadac is “played out between the declaration of love written on the bed, the threat of the saw blade that appears as a punishment, and the mixture of delight and suffering

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\(^{141}\) Bourgeois, “Donald Kuspit,” 158.
suggested by the pose of the body.”

Cell (Arch of Hysteria) appears in stark contrast from The Destruction of the Father, yet it contains many of the same ideas established in The Destruction of the Father. Cell (Arch of Hysteria) is not as literal in its subject matter as The Destruction of the Father but the tension between the same polarities – male and female, pleasure and pain, disgust and revulsion – exist. Like the polarities of The Destruction of the Father they are manifestations of Bourgeois’ psychic fracture. They represent the push and pull within her between her father’s acceptance and her hatred for her father.

In The Destruction of the Father, revulsion and desire were established by the conflicting actions of killing and consuming. The children are angry with the father and they kill him as well as eat him. This cannibalistic act serves as a metaphor of assuming the father’s power. They are disgusted with the father and they want the power of the father. In Cell (Arch of Hysteria), revulsion and desire is established by the juxtaposition of the band saw, decapitated figure, and the words written on the bed. Even though je t’aime is embroidered repeatedly on the bed, there is a blatant violent implication between the decapitated figure and the band saw. The unmistakable violence acted against the body is countered by the repeated affirmations of love.

In The Destruction of the Father, pleasure and pain are represented in the central platform which Bourgeois identified as the table (a site of pain) and a bed (a site of pleasure). For Bourgeois, the simultaneous presence of both is two ends of a spectrum. In Cell (Arch of Hysteria), just like Cell III and Arch of Hysteria, Bourgeois uses the same arched figure to represent both pleasure and pain.

The body in Cell (Arch of Hysteria) is also the site of the final juxtaposition, male and female. In The Destruction of the Father, the merging of male and female forms referenced

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142 Bernadac, Bourgeois (Flammarion), 142-44.
143 Bernadac, Bourgeois (Flammarion), 63.
Bourgeois’ unconscious anxiety about her gender cultivated by her father. In *Cell (Arch of Hysteria)*, Bourgeois uses a male figure in a female pose. The figure is posed in an arch of hysteria (hence the title), which was a body position associated with hysteric’s. Hysteria was historically considered a “female” condition. However, Bourgeois presented the arch through the body of a male figure. According to Bourgeois, she used a male figure because twentieth-century males could be hysterical too. Even if this is not a direct nod to her father’s own over-emotional behavior, it merges male and female identities. Merging seems to reference Bourgeois’ anxiety she felt over her gender, which was established in her father’s contradictory treatment of her.

If Bourgeois felt permanent relief from completing *Destruction of the Father*, she would have not repeated the same ideas over and over in her work. However, this repetition is a enactment of her unconscious fantasies—repetition as *jouissance*. Through repetition, Bourgeois derives temporary pleasure, and temporary fulfillment. Unfortunately, the relief is only temporary, and the tension builds until it must be addressed again.

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144 As in *Arch of Hysteria*, the figure in *Cell (Arch of Hysteria)* is a cast of Bourgeois’ long time assistant Jerry Gorovoy. According to Bourgeois, Jerry was not a participant or intended to be a part of the scene’s emotionality. The veracity of such a statement cannot be covered in the scope of this paper.

145 Bernadac, *Bourgeois (Flammarion)*, 142. For thousands of years, hysteria was typically associated with women. At first believed to be the result of a wandering uterus, it later became synonymous with severe emotional distress in women through the work of Jean-Martin Charcot. Bourgeois, while disagreeing with his sexist theories, loved Charcot and studied his work extensively.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

When I started this thesis I struggled to articulate the complex and abstract ideas behind Louise Bourgeois’ work through Lacanian theory. In a moment of frustration, I conveyed my beliefs about Bourgeois’ work through the narrative of *Fight Club*. I had no intention of using this descriptive comparison in my final thesis. It was only after my advisor’s suggestion that I adapted the thesis to include *Fight Club*. Interestingly, what had been a difficult and cumbersome paper to write became profoundly clear and enjoyable.

Using elements of pop culture to describe ideas, stories, events, and so forth, is common personal practice. Many of my interpersonal conversations start with phrases like “It’s like that scene in ....” Even beyond my lived experience, in the twenty-first century it is hard to ignore the impact of movies, television, and music on individuals. Our lives are saturated by the culture created by the media more and more everyday. Certain disciplines, like art history, try to remain neutral and free of such mainstream influences but this creates a divide between it and the world. Embracing the world outside academia expands the possibilities for artistic interpretation.

Even though my unconventional approach to Bourgeois’ art was initially accidental, it remains relevant to this paper’s exploration of Bourgeois’ work. The artist’s persistent and ongoing murder of her father speaks to an unconscious and uncontrollable urge. Much in the same way, the narrator of *Fight Club* created Tyler Durden in order to satisfy his own unconscious desires. They enhance the concepts represented in each and reinforce Jacques Lacan’s theories about the complex nature of the unconscious.

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146 Which later became the introduction of the paper.
147 Pop culture in an art history thesis – for shame.
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*Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher, screenplay by Jim Uhls (20th Century Fox, 1999), DVD (2002).


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