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Let's Talk About Fight Club: A Feminist, Marxist, Psychoanalytic, Queer, and Existentialist

Reading of *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk

Introduction

“The first rule about fight club is you don’t talk about fight club,” the narrator tells the reader, but there is a loophole – the rules never say anything against writing about fight club (Palahniuk 48). Most people know *Fight Club* as the movie directed by David Fincher, but it originates from the novel by Chuck Palahniuk. *Fight Club* is set in the 1990s; women are in the workplace and men are feeling emasculated. Our nameless narrator is a slave to corporate America with crippling insomnia which leads him to joining an array of male support groups, the most talked about one being Remaining Men Together, a group for men with testicular cancer. No, the narrator does not have testicular cancer; he is faking it, but mentally he feels as if he has been castrated. He also fakes having blood parasites too, but anyway at these support groups he meets Marla Singer, another fake like him. Feeling uncomfortable by being found out by a woman, his insomnia returns and he must find another way to cope. This is when he meets Tyler Durden, a soap salesman and part-time projectionist. Thus, creating their own support group of fight club where men can beat each other to a pulp in a mildly homoerotic setting, which later escalates to Project Mayhem in an attempt to destroy the world. The important plot twist to this madness is that the narrator *is* Tyler Durden. The narrator realizes that when he thinks he is asleep, he becomes Tyler Durden. The whole time the narrator has been struggling with a

personality disorder, Dissociative Identity Disorder, formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder. He created a split personality due to his insomnia as well as feeling emasculated due to consumerism in corporate America.

Now to unpack this a little: How did the narrator get to the point of splitting his personality? The first step is to analyze this from a psychoanalytic point of view, but the development of mental illness is not one to happen out of the blue. In order to get to the bottom of how Tyler came to be, one must look through many different lenses – feminist, queer, Marxist, and existentialism. Women becoming more prevalent in the work place lead to men feeling emasculated and that is why Tyler creates fight club, which is a very hyper-masculine compensation for the members not feeling “man enough.” This piece of *Fight Club* can be looked at from a feminist theory, which then ties into the psychoanalytic theory because while needing to find a way to feel like a man, the narrator created Tyler Durden. While those two theories go hand-in-hand, Marxist view explains further the oppression that men are feeling in the workplace, queer theory highlights some of the same points as feminist theory does, and existentialism presents the existential dread men feel from being stuck in an office work setting rather than living out dreams they may have. *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk can be analyzed using multiple theories because men in the novel have the need to partake in hyper-masculine activities and the reason why the narrator created a more masculine personality compared to his baseline. A quote that really sums up all the theories used to dissect *Fight Club* is taken from David Savran’s *Taking It Like A Man*:

[A] new masculinity became hegemonic in the 1970s because it represents an attempt by white men to respond to an regroup in the face of particular social and economic challenges: the reemergence of the feminist movement; the limited

success of the civil rights movement in readdressing gross historical inequities...; the rise of the lesbian and gay rights movements; the failure of America's most disastrous imperialistic adventure, the Vietnam War, and, perhaps most important, the end of the post-World War II economic boom and the resultant steady decline in the income of white working- and lower-middle-class men (Savran 5).

It is important to analyze *Fight Club* because society can learn from fiction in the way that norms are set up. Men should be allowed to be ambiguous regarding sexuality and gender identity, and the hyper-masculine ideology is extremely toxic to the point where it actually harms men. This is not to say that masculinity is bad, but when "gendered behaviors" start to tell men how to be a man, it can all go wrong (Clemens). Men are not naturally violent, but with the inappropriate model and society pushing masculinity to be equal to physical power, it can create the idea that some men are failing. Albert Bandura's social learning theory states that "because humans are social beings, they learn from observing others..." (Berger 28). This can go for all genders really; behavioral psychologists have proven that when children have negative models they will begin to imitate those unhealthy behaviors. In today's society, feminism tries to make sure that all genders are equal, and break down the idea that being masculine equates to being macho. Looking at the narrator's diagnosis of Dissociate Identity Disorder (DID), it shows how dangerous needing to be a macho man is, where normalizing femininity could have potentially prevented the environmental trigger the narrator needed to create Tyler Durden. Many critiques and analyses have been done on the movie and novel, and many of them focus on the effects of consumer culture, women's independence, other progressive social movements, and the psychology behind Tyler which leads to masculine violence, and instilling existential dread with near-death experiences.

Psychoanalytic View: “I Know This Because Tyler Knows This...”

To analyze *Fight Club* and the main character using psychoanalytic theory, one must look at the factors that affect the narrator’s everyday life, those being the creeping feminization of society, social movements of marginalized groups, and his insomnia. These all add up to the creation of his split personality, Tyler Durden. Psychoanalytic theory branches from the ideas of Sigmund Freud who relied on the unconscious, the psychosexual stages of development, “Mourning and Melancholia,” and the levels of personality – the id, ego, and superego. This theory is used to assume that the characters within a particular work are pieces of the author’s own psyche, but for this paper, the theory will be used to diagnose the narrator as “this critical endeavor seeks evidence of unresolved emotions, psychological conflicts, guilts, ambivalences, and so forth...” (Delahoyde). The big plot twist of *Fight Club* is when the reader finds out that Tyler is actually the narrator because these seemingly different individuals are nothing alike. The narrator hinted from the very beginning that the majority of his knowledge is because “Tyler knows this” (Palahniuk 2). The reader assumes it is because they are close friends, but in reality, they share the same body and brain. Tyler is described as “the imagined and idealized version of himself” (King 377). He is the narrator’s alter ego, the desirably more masculine part of his personality. The part that he feels is being taken away by the progression of society.

When the realization of the narrator being Tyler is presented, the narrator still tries to convince the reader otherwise. Only once in the novel does he state that he is Tyler and also comes to terms with Tyler being his split personality: “Oh this is bullshit. This is a dream. Tyler is a projection. He’s a dissociative personality disorder. A psychotic fugue state. Tyler Durden is my hallucination” (Palahniuk 168). The true diagnosis for the narrator is that he has Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) which, according to the DSM-V, is categorized as having “the presence

of two or more distinct personality states...” and “the disruption in identity involves marked discontinuity in sense of self and sense of agency, accompanied by related alteration in affect, behavior, consciousness, memory, perception, cognition...functioning” (292). This means that the person who is suffering from DID has more than one personality, but the baseline personality may not be aware of it. They lose their sense of self, effecting their actions and how they think and perceive the world around them. There is a lack of “recall of everyday events” which is seen by the narrator when he is not aware of going out to plan the destruction of Project Mayhem – the violent child of what came from fight club (292). The fugue state that the narrator is aware of is now referred to as Dissociative Amnesia that “most often consists of localized or selective amnesia for a specific event,” hence the narrator assuming he is asleep when really, he has switched to Tyler and is terrorizing the village (298).

The narrator is viewed as “the white male rebel” who is the one chosen to create a revolution against the feminization that is turning him and his male companions “soft” (Ta 270). This feminization is threatening him and based on the theories of Gilbert and Gubar, men believe their power is because of their genitalia. If he loses this then he loses everything. Freud’s theories come into play when looking at the fear of castration, which arises during the phallic stage of the psychosexual stages, that is evident in many of the characters (who are all male, except for Marla Singer), pointedly in the Remaining Men Together support group where the men are finding ways to still feel masculine when they have had their testicles removed due to testicular cancer. Because, apparently, the only way to be a man is to have testicles. The narrator is faking testicular cancer so his fear of castration can be lessened by being surrounded by men who have lost the one thing he believes that makes them men. One review states that “their emasculation is a physiological one while [the narrator’s] is a psychological one” (Ta 271). When it comes down

to the pending destruction the narrator has done as Tyler, he needs to decide whether to undo it all, or “be castrated,” so to say. He “equates masculinity with the hyper-masculine world of Tyler, and the choice to escape this world is the choice of castration” (Ta 270).

Ta states, “The white male rebel, who despises the corporate masochist that endures self-inflicted punishment by participating in a feminized society, must therefore resist to be his lost masculinity” and uses Freud’s “Morning and Melancholia” to describe this as well as the split personality. There are two conditions, mourning, the reaction someone has to the loss of a loved one or “the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one” (Freud 153). Mourning is a state of grieving which can transform into melancholia, relating to clinical depression. The unconscious loss of the “love-object” is unaware to the individual (Freud 155). The dissociated condition, Tyler, can be accounted for based on Freud’s model of melancholic sadomasochism, finding pleasure through pain. Tyler is described as “sadistic and masculine” while the narrator is “masochistic and feminine” and they partake in self-violence to recover the narrator’s manhood (Ta 266). The narrator tortures himself for this recovery. When the narrator begins to understand the loss of his masculinity he splits into a “tyrannical superego that punishes the submissive ego that in turn grows to enjoy the punishment” (Ta 266). The superego, as Freud describes, is the “judgmental part of the personality” that works on the idea of being punished for a particular behavior, while the ego is the “conscious decision-making component” (Berger 215). Tyler is the superego that causes punishment to the narrator who is considered the ego, which is the civilized part of the conscious.

When looking at Freud’s model of the psyche – the id, ego, and superego – it could be assumed that Tyler would fall under the criteria to be the id. The id runs solely on the pleasure principle, seeking out immediate gratification. It is the impulsive part of the psyche, and does not

rely on logic in order to function (McLeod). This can be applied to Tyler when looking at Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, that focuses on three psychoanalytic orders: "the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real" (130). He believes that reality is dependent on the connection of these three ideas, where Imaginary is the "[appearance] and... interpersonal relations with other people," the Symbolic "forms the dimension of what has been signified and is meaningful to an individual," and the Real is what has not been symbolized (Yansori). Marc Price uses Lacan's theory to describe Tyler by stating, "Man is not lived through the id as Freud might argue but is instead 'spoken' by the id" and the "unconscious is structured like a language" (Price). Tyler is able to control the narrator through the way that he speaks, and how he phrases his ideas. The narrator is made aware of this based on this quote, "Tyler's words coming out of my mouth. I used to be such a nice person" as well as the repetition seen of "I know this because Tyler knows this" (Palahniuk 44, 1). Tyler controls the Imaginary and Symbolic of the narrator's life while he is on his journey to search for his self, and a proper role model since he never had a male figure growing up. The narrator is longing to find meaning outside of his boring and meaningless life that is consumed by working.

Marxist View: Another Cog in the Machine

Marxist criticism, inspired by the historian Karl Marx, is looking at literature as it "reflects [the] social institutions out of which it emerges and it itself [is] a social institution with a particular ideological function" (Delahoyde). It highlights the struggle characters face with materialism, wealth, and/or class. The literature is a product of "the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era" (Abrams 149). Starting during the 1970s, women started to leave their gender-assigned role of staying home all day, and went into the workplace. This only grew when the 1990's came around, and the independence that women embraced led them to

being in control of their own lives. Of course, many men feared this and began to feel oppressed, creating a parallel to how many women have felt for years. Not only was being a slave to corporate America an ordeal, but now women were taking up the space that only men once resided. The narrator feels as though his masculinity is being taken away from him because of this, and that loss is blamed on capitalism, consumer culture, and the pressure brought to businesses by customers (Rehling).

With the rise of liberal democracy, there has been an increase of focus on the individual, being responsible for their own successes and failures. The narrator of *Fight Club* is the individual described by Marx to be the one who “denies and represses pleasure” to maintain a close focus on his work and be productive (Ta 269). The model of the modern working-class man used to be one that would use his body to get work done to maintain the necessities of everyday life. That is the ideal that the men in *Fight Club* are trying to maintain because the new model of the working-class man is the “young, computer-whiz yuppie” whose goals are to be rich by their twenties, be involved in start-up e-commerce businesses, and to acquire, or consume, expensive products (Giroux 5). *Fight Club* suggests that consumerism is an attack on traditional values of masculinity, and that this developing culture has stolen said masculinity. To counteract this, they must revolt against all that is seemingly feminine. The rise of capitalism created the notion that men are becoming soft because it was something that was domesticating them, which is generally seen as a feminine stereotype, and the idea of consumer culture, or shopping, is also seen as a feminine activity as well.

What these men crave is a rebirth of society, and in order to achieve that they must destroy as much of the world as they can, starting with big corporate businesses. Tyler is the brain of the idea that their generation has been robbed of opportunities because of the

postmodern consumer world, and economic depression (Rehling). These white heterosexual men feel as though they are at the disadvantage, when statistically speaking marginalized groups have been at the disadvantage, and still are, for a much longer time. Studies show that from the 1980s until present day that white men have “out-earned” black and Hispanic men, as well as all racial groups of women (Patten). For example, black men earn 74% of what white men earn, while Hispanic men earn 63% (Patten). The wage gap among genders and race has improved within the recent years, but there is still inequality seen in pay.

The result of what comes from fight club is Project Mayhem, where instead of causing harm to individuals, they begin to target larger spaces. Each person in the group is assigned a small task, not entirely certain of the plan, but the rule of Project Mayhem is to trust Tyler (Palahniuk 130). One article refers to the ideas of David Savran, who compares Project Mayhem to The Patriot Movement that caused the Oklahoma bombing in 1995 (Rehling). Society was surprised to find out that the perpetrators of the bombing were “white working and middle-class men [who] believed themselves to be victims of the social and economic progress made in the last 30 years by women, African Americans and racial / ethnic / sexual minorities (Savran 4). Most people found it hard to believe when white, working-class men were the cause of violence because they were the ones to be portrayed as family men, who went to work to support their wives and children. The thing is, marginalized groups were sometimes unable to obtain equal level jobs such as these white men. People would be more likely to blame marginalized groups for crimes due to society’s institutionalized racism, “the systematic distribution of resources, power, and [opportunities] in our society to...benefit...people who are white and [exclude] people of color” (Solid Ground). This is still prevalent today, and work still needs to be done to

completely rid our society of institutionalized racism, but with the rise of acceptance these groups have been able to achieve more.

Fight Club showcases the culture of late capitalism within society and the troubles it creates with the commercialization, profits, and consumption by customers. The novel rebels against this culture that tries to erase masculinity and steal manhood from the white men in this society. Consumer culture is seen as domesticated which is seen as passive and feminine, leaving these men feeling emasculated (Giroux 5). White men are already dominant in society, but to them they are unaware and fear the smallest push of them not being on top. When they feel as if their masculinity is being compromised, they fight back to the extreme which leads to hyper-masculine values, and the idea that men are not able to show the softer side of emotions, not talk about what is bothering them. This leads into the part of the topic where research was lacking in regards to *Fight Club*, how feminism can benefit everyone, and how the expectations of men are harmful.

Feminist Theory: The Madwoman in *Fight Club*

While consumerism is said to harm masculinity, causing men to feel soft, they sought out their own type of support group in the creation of fight club, where instead of sharing emotions and crying, they beat each other to a pulp. This is all done in an attempt to reclaim their masculinity. There are multiple views surrounding the word feminism, but in short it is supposed to be defined as equality among all genders regardless of class, religions, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on. Today's media seems to focus only on the radical side of feminism, disregarding the hard work that women did in terms of equal opportunities, such as women being able to vote, work, and to eliminate the stereotypes of women. Feminist literary criticism focuses on "sociopolitical feminism, critiques patriarchal language and literature by exposing how these

reflect masculine ideology. It examines gender politics in works and traces the subtle construction of masculinity and femininity, and their relative status, positionings, and marginalizations within works” (Delahoyde). It also makes us aware of “stereotypical representations of genders” (Delahoyde). Essentially, it helps the reader pinpoint society’s bias toward privileged white men, and how it effects all genders. The voice of women and other marginalized groups have been discredited for years, and the men that have been in power are starting to fear the idea that these people have something important to say, even if they are not really listening.

Feminist literary theory was adapted from the ideas of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who wrote *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which analyzed popular literature from the nineteenth century that was written by the women of that time. They looked at how the writers were trapped in making their female characters be either an “angel” or “monster” – either the Virgin Mary or Eve (Gilbert & Gubar). This demonstrated the notion of how male writers portrayed women as either angelic beings, or madwomen. The crazy, unkempt woman has only evolved since then, and now there is a new phrase for this trop called the “manic pixie dream girl,” generally more prominent in film, but modern young adult novels have also portrayed this (Solomon 2). This is the trope that a female character is supposed to come into the miserable life of the male character, and liven it up with her mysteriousness, crazy antics, fantasies (Dunder 6). The majority of John Green’s novels have a manic pixie dream girl, and to switch it up a little he even wrote a male character to fit the criteria in *The Fault in our Stars*. Now how does all of this relate to *Fight Club*? Marla Singer is the unkempt, madwoman, who is assumed to save our male main character.

The narrator does attend support groups strictly for men, where he feels comfortable enough to show emotion, hug, and cry with them all. Participating in this allows the narrator's insomnia to subside, but all that is all interrupted when Marla Singer appears. She is another fake like him, and his knowing of this causes his insomnia to affect him again and he is unable to "pass because he finds emotional release difficult in the presence of another fake" (Ta 267). Marla is the only known female character in this novel and the interesting thing is she does not seem like other women. One might say she holds male qualities in how she acts – promiscuity, brutal honesty, being intrigued with things that are unladylike (i.e. death). The narrator says, "My power animal is Marla" insinuating that this statement is a bad thing, but really, she is his manic pixie dream girl who gives his life some sort of excitement, or else he will remain a corporate drone (Palahniuk 18).

Although *Fight Club* does not center around the experiences of women as most feminist literature does, it can be an example of the lack of feminism and how male violence can affect all parties. It is not a feminist novel, but it shows what happens when these progressive ideals are not accepted by everyone, and how hyper-masculinity is toxic and dangerous even for men. Society says that bottling up emotions is not something we ought to do, but on the flip side society tells men to not show emotion, that they need to be tough, they cannot cry, there is a never-ending list of expectations. What feminism tries to achieve is the understanding that men can show qualities that are stereotyped as feminine, and that it is valid for them to be emotional beings. There is a misunderstanding about the objective of feminism, and it leaves people to believe that women want to be superior to men – that is misandry, not feminism, and misandry is just as harmful as misogyny.

In *Fight Club*, there is only the mention of father figures in the context of them never being present. The men of fight club did not have fathers to look up to because of the rise in divorce rates. The narrator talks about how he does not remember anything about his father and this brings in one of the most famous lines from *Fight Club*, “What you see a fight club is a generation of men raised by women” (Palahniuk 50). The narrator asks Tyler who he is fighting in fight club, who he is envisioning, and Tyler’s response is his father. They have this pent-up anger because they feel abandoned by their fathers, and since they did not have a good male role model, they turn to violence. The narrator believes that the uprise of a feminist culture has taken away the “rugged individualism” of men (Ta 265). In order to gather why the narrator’s masculinity feels threatened, it is important to look at the historical and societal elements that were prominent in the 1990s. The men of fight club believe that they are now victims due to oppression caused by other groups gaining their voices after years of silence. These men have had to witness the recreation of masculinity, which is not solely the rugged type anymore. This view can also be seen as a stereotype for heterosexual men, as homosexual men are assumed to be more passive. Masculinity was something that could be shown off at all times, but now with the progression of society, they are being asked to reach within themselves:

Nonetheless the [ornamental] culture reshapes [man’s] most basic sense of manhood by telling him...that masculinity is something to drape over the body, not draw from inner resources; that it is personally, not societal; that manhood is displayed, not demonstrated. The internal qualities once said to embody manhood – surefootedness, inner strength, confidence of purpose – are merchandised to men to enhance their manliness (Faludi 35).

Faludi argues that society has taken away a man's usefulness and has replaced the traditional values of "who has the most, the best, and the fastest" (Ta 237). It is the similar idea for women that they must compete with each other on a beauty-based standard, and now men must compete with each other as well, reducing manliness to an accessory to show off. Although Tyler is just an extension of the narrator's brain, he is the creator of fight club. By setting the foundation of this group, he believes that the cure to their loss of masculinity is violence, testing to see how tough each individual man is in the group by beating each other to a pulp. Rehling states that, "Violence is posited as a means of remasculinization, although it is enduring pain rather than inflicting it that affirms virility" (1). The hyper-masculine aspects of the club are to compensate for the loss of power due to a feminine-dominant culture, and not having a solid male figure in their lives due to divorce rates rising as a result of women becoming more independent, and not wanting to stay in bad relationships. Fighting each other and eventually leading to the call for ultimate destruction is how these men will regain power over everything, or destroy themselves in the process. They feel as if they are being oppressed – they are starting to feel like women – so in order to get said power, they need to destroy the world in order to set up a path to rebirth. This need for rebirth leads to Project Mayhem.

In an attempt to beat each other back to life, the idea of a "grotesque body" rids them of anything feminine (King 369). When the body is bruised and beaten it is seen as rugged, which is one of the masculine qualities the narrator is trying to regain, and on the flipside the fragile, put-together body is seen as feminine.

Queer Theory: No Shirt, No Shoes

When reading and analyzing *Fight Club* it is hard to ignore the homoerotic undertones of the novel, despite the fact that the main characters are assumed to be heterosexual. In doing so,

queer theory is helpful when picking apart the text. This theory is derived from feminist theory, but while feminist critiques focus on what is feminine and what is masculine, queer theory tries to break down the binaries between those two genders and looks at the bigger pictures of gender being a spectrum (Purdue). While also focusing on gender studies, queer theory can help explain the experience of LGBTQ+ history through literature. In the case of *Fight Club*, this theory will be used to analyze the lack of characters with different sexual orientations, as well as the undertones that could assume they are repressing their sexualities.

The men in the novel are turning to violence because of the oppression they are feeling, and also, in an attempt to reject all things that do not fit their physical, nor mental view and idea of masculinity. It is assumed those things include anything outside of being a white heterosexual male, but even the pain and violent images are showing the repression of homosexuality. The novel opens up with a seemingly homoerotic moment between the narrator and Tyler, before the reader knows they are the same person, where Tyler is holding his gun in the narrator's mouth. Ta states that "The gun, as an instrument of pain and violence, thereby immediately framing the [novel] in a homosexually suggestive position" (Ta 272). Many critics view the gun as a phallic symbol, sexualizing the position they are both in, even though this is a glimpse at the narrator's attempted suicide that is to come.

Another scene occurring later is when Tyler kisses the narrator's hand, and then pours corrosive lye onto the spot, where the kiss will remain permanently. Giroux describes this as "Tyler initiating [the narrator] into a higher [reach] of homoerotically charged sadism..." (Giroux 16). At the moment of this during the novel, the pain seemed to be so unbearable to the point where the narrator pictured himself and the pain to be separated by a "long, long road," not wanting to be in the moment to feel, but Tyler tells him to "Come back to the pain" (Palahniuk

75). The narrator compares this moment to that of a guided meditation that occurs in the support groups he went to. The difference is that when attending the support groups, the men there including the narrator allowed themselves to feel emotions, and cry to let them out, but during this scene the narrator repeats to himself, “Don’t look at your hand. Don’t think of the word *searing* or *flesh*... Don’t hear yourself cry” (Palahniuk 75). He is not allowing himself to feel the appropriate emotions that are connected to the intense amount of pain he must be feeling. Throughout the novel, the mark left on his skin is always described as “Tyler’s kiss,” in an almost romantic way, and never looked at as a memory of pain (Palahniuk 75).

The fifth rule of fight club is no shirt or shoes while fighting (Palahniuk 49). The key part to focus on is the no shirt aspect. There is something homoerotic about a bunch of half-naked men, rolling around that is witnessed at fight club. It is interesting to see that these men are probably not secure in their sexuality due to the creation of fight club and Project Mayhem in order to create a rebirth of traditional values, but the fact that they allow themselves to not be fully clothed among other men contradicts the idea that they are worried about being anything else that seems to reject the masculine ideal. While men are being victimized for being feminine, “...Gender and queer theory are interested in the breakdown of binaries such as male and female, the in-betweens” (Purdue). Queer theory states that it is okay for men to be feminine and it is okay for women to be masculine. King argues that *Fight Club* is “replete with fluid, ambiguous, and transgressive bodies,” and the examples for this are Big Bob and Angel Face (376). Bob is one of the men who lost his testicles to testicular cancer, and the hormones he needs to take cause him to develop breasts. He is seen as a motherly figure in *Fight Club*, when the narrator is able to release his emotions during the meeting’s hug-and-cry fest. Angel Face is one of the cronies the reader meets when Project Mayhem is starting up, and is praised for being

effeminately beautiful, which is ironic given the reasons for why fight club started. Tyler is seen as the more masculine version of the narrator because he has not been emasculated by consumerism – although he and the narrator are the same person – but the narrator places his lost masculinity in this split personality. Tyler rejects all things feminine, and continuously tries to make sure that “heteronormativity and phallic power are...reinforced,” starting with small actions such as inserting frames of the male genitalia while working as a projectionist (King 379).

***Fight Club* Viewed as Existentialism: Instillation of Fear to Live Out Their Dreams**

Now, the glorification of violence that takes place could certainly give the wrong idea to some people, and may even encourage others to be violent when things are not going their way. Does it promote violence and misogynistic principles? Since the narrator is experiencing a psychological disorder that causes him to dissociate from himself, and “become” another identity, he is seen as an unreliable narrator. Taking a step back from the other literary criticisms, Robert Bennet uses existentialism to dissect *Fight Club*. He argues that existentialism “provides a superior critical framework for interpreting [the novel] ...because [he believes] that such an approach will open up, rather than close off, further critical discussion” (Bennet 68).

The narrator is on an ever-going journey of near-death experiences, starting with the opening scene of the novel: “Tyler sticks loaded guns in his mouth, drives him at recklessly high speeds into on-coming traffic, and threatens to castrate him—all to remind him that the ‘first step to eternal life is you have to die’ (Palahniuk 11)” (Bennet 69). The novel begins with the ending of the story, which is the gun scene, but when this occurs later in the novel the narrator shoots himself in the mouth. He survives, but this leads him to be taken to a psychiatric hospital. Bennet disagrees with Giroux’s analysis of *Fight Club* being “survival of the fittest...legitimizing

dehumanizing forms of violence as a source of pleasure and sociality” (Giroux 12). He ignores how the narrator and Tyler “find immense pleasure in their private troubles and turn to violence...because they find it humanizing rather than dehumanizing” (Bennet 69).

An example from the novel is when Tyler makes the narrator threaten Raymond K. Hessel’s life – a minimum-wage clerk at Korner Mart. The only reason he is spared is because the narrator asks him to take this near-death experience as the push to have him leave his job that is taking him nowhere. The narrator wants Raymond to leave and pursue his real dreams. He “seems to employ violence here...to re-humanize his victim and to liberate him from the ideology of the market” (Bennet 70). These consistent “dread-induced” near-death experiences are to bring about the possibility of freedom from corporate America (Bennet 70). Presenting the idea that the only way to escape the society they are in is by partaking in behaviors so risky, that it will scare themselves into a restart, or scare them into an existential crisis.

Rejecting perfection is rejecting capitalism, thus pursuing destructive behaviors. The narrator wants nothing to do with perfection as seen in this oddly phrased prayer, “May I never be complete. May I never be content. May I never be perfect. Deliver me, Tyler, from being perfect and complete” (Palahniuk 46). The narrator is defining himself by his loss of masculinity, wanting to never be complete, rather continuing on in the search for it instead of obtaining it. This all ties back to the idea that masculine bodies are bruised ones, and this is solidified with the very last line in this chapter, after his prayer to Tyler. Tyler says to the narrator “I want you to hit me as hard as you can” (Palahniuk 46).

Conclusion: Why We Should Talk About *Fight Club*

The narrator’s loss of masculinity leads to the creation of his split personality Tyler, due to the feminization of the 1990s, lack of acceptance of progressive human rights movements, and

because he has become a corporate American drone. The narrator is suffering from Dissociative Identity Disorder, which is usually a cause of a traumatic experience, but in the terms of this novel, the loss of masculinity is the traumatic event (DSM-V). Literary theories are able to prove this through the presentation of the male characters, the lack of women other than Marla, and the time period of the 1990s where women were entering the workplace, and divorce rates were rising. Women were realizing they did not have to stay in unhappy marriages, leading the men of fight club to be fatherless, lacking an appropriate male role model. Despite the progressive movements of the 90s, people were still scared of “the other,” shunning anything that did not follow the appropriate social norms. Queer theory and gender studies works to break the binaries of a strictly male/female society, where gender is seen on spectrum, but only now in the recent years has that been noticed.

Contrary to rule number one, there are discussions that should be, and need to be held when analyzing *Fight Club*. Societal pressures were usually put on women, but this novel proves that they can also affect men and the hyper-masculine ideals are toxic. All around from advertisements, portrayals in commercials and television, to clear gender based products, men are expected to be masculine. Although this is a fictional story, *Fight Club* presents truths about how society was in the 1990s and even how it is during this time. The earlier generations have become more progressive and accepting, but there are still negative stereotypes presented to certain groups of people, and still expectations from traditional values. *Fight Club* shows the exaggerated reaction of white men who feel oppressed due to the progressiveness of their time. The narrator creates a split personality to cope with his feelings of emasculation

Some question if *Fight Club* is some sort of satire on white men in society.

Systematically, they are the ones with the most privilege who come out on top. Chuck Palahniuk

is gay, which is an ideal that is not viewed as masculine. Whether he was open about this at the time or not could have affected his emotions, or he could have observed how other men with repressed emotions felt. In an interview, Palahniuk says that *Fight Club* should have ended at that, and the men would go out and make something of themselves after they got what they wanted out of fighting – which is empowerment. Project Mayhem crossed the line in the sense that the madness kept going. Even though the novel ends with the narrator shooting himself and being taken to a psychiatric hospital, fight club never dies (Palahniuk). The narrator tells us “Everything in heaven is white on white...quiet, rubber-soled shoes...People write to me in heaven and tell me I’m remembered. That I’m their hero” (Palahniuk 206-207). Heaven is a psychiatric hospital, the people writing to him are the members of fight club/Project Mayhem. Every now and then someone passes by him sporting a broken nose, black eye, stitches, and tells him “We’re going to break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world” (Palahniuk 208). The better world being one where they successfully dismantle corporate America, and are able to regain their masculinity. To live in a world where everything goes back to the way it used to be.

Even though the mind that created fight club is being subsided by medication and treatment, the plans live on. The men were not able to break away from their masochistic support group, assuming that these hyper-masculine ways of life continued on. They were unable to find a way to empower themselves in a positive way, and continued to grasp onto toxic masculine ideals – again, queer theory works to diminish these ideas. They did not go out and make something of themselves, become rich or what not, they stayed behind because fighting gave them a sense of life. A sense of feeling alive.

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