

Feminization of a capitalistic society in palahniuk's fight club



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The novel *Fight Club*, by Chuck Palahniuk, tells the story of a nameless protagonist enveloped in a consumer-driven society. A stereotypical American driven by consumption and possessions, he finds himself living day-to-day as a cog in the machine of a corporate society. Plagued by insomnia and his detachment to the world, the narrator must split his personality, thereby creating a powerful alter ego with which to attack society. With 20th century America as a backdrop, Palahniuk writes a powerful critique of the effects of a feminized, capitalistic society on the mind of this nameless narrator.

The narrator in Palahniuk's *Fight Club* is one of millions of cogs in corporate America. A recall campaign coordinator of a nameless company, he describes himself as an average, middle class American. Traveling for work, he constantly wakes up to what he refers to as a "single serving" life. "I go to the hotel tiny soap, tiny shampoos, single-serving butter, tiny mouthwash and a single-use toothbrush" (Palahniuk 28). He later describes his obsession with consumer culture, saying: "You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple years you're satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you've got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug. Then you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you" (44).

Further, the narrator makes it clear he isn't the only one with an ingrained nesting instinct. When detailing his consumer-driven life, he states "the people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue" (43). As a product-

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driven society has become the new American norm, Palahniuk shows us the replacement of stereotypical male activities replaced with domestic, “nesting instincts”.

In her critical analysis of the film version of the novel, “Hurt So Good: Fight Club, Masculine Violence, and the Crisis of Capitalism”, Lynn M. Ta suggests this description of American culture exhibits “an anxiety about masturbatory commercialism by locating the cause of [the narrator’s] seeming loss of masculinity in the proliferation of consumer culture, thereby making participation in capitalism, once considered an entrepreneurial and male endeavor, a feminine activity” (Ta 273). We see in this critique the bonds between an encroaching feminized culture and a capitalistic society. This capitalistic culture, then, can be seen as the root of the loss of traditional male values, replacing them with domestic, feminine, commercial values.

In “Fight Club: Historicizing the Rhetoric of Masculinity, Violence, and Sentimentality”, Suzanne Clark puts forth the theory that the idea of the “domestic, consuming individual (object of middle-class desire) is feminine” (Clark 413). It is this domestic, feminine world that we see our narrator fighting against. The novel, then, reasserts the masculine identity which is threatened by the feminization of an increasingly consumerist American culture. This said, Palahniuk’s nameless protagonist, in an effort to regain his lost masculinity, must create Tyler Durden, his alter ego.

Tyler is everything the narrator is not. A radical anarchist, Tyler revolts against anything driven by capitalism. When creating “Fight Club” (and later Project Mayhem) Tyler gives an impassioned speech, explaining: “

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Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they don't need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need. We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives" (Palahniuk 149). With no great war or depression, " Tyler registers the lack of purpose his generation experiences, and his tirade not only condemns the capitalist cycle to which they are enslaved. . . it is the ideal of liberalism that has disillusioned men into thinking that masculinity and success are attainable through personal effort" (Ta 274). Entwined with the disgust of capitalism is Tyler's revolt against all things feminine. This revolt is evident in the fear of castration that runs throughout the novel. From the beginning of the novel, we see the narrator attempting to cure his insomnia through a self-help group for men with testicular cancer. Through " Remaining Men Together", the narrator " is able to find comfort among other men who have also experienced a sense of masculine loss" (Ta 270). However, as Ta explains, the narrator's loss is merely psychological. " Therefore, [the narrator's], fear of castration is alleviated in the presence of men who have undergone actual castration" (Ta 270).

In creating Tyler, the narrator seeks to recover this lost masculinity caused by a capitalistic society. He splits into " a sadistic (and masculine) Tyler who criticizes and punishes a masochistic (and feminine) self" (Ta 266).

Throughout the novel, we see the narrator and his alter ego revolt against the feminized corporate world. As the narrator expresses a fear of castration through his attendance at " Remaining Men Together", his alter ego, Tyler

expresses a similar fear of castration. Tyler, working as a movie projectionist splices penis images into family films. Often discussing his estranged father, Tyler says “ he starts a new family in a new town about ever six years” (Palahniuk 50). When his dad suggests he marry, Tyler responds “ I’m a thirty-year-old boy, and I’m wondering if another woman is really the answer I need” (Palahniuk 51). Thus, by splicing shots of penises into family films, Ta suggests he is “ figuratively cutting off his own penis and inserting it into the family unit as a means of reasserting patriarchal authority in an otherwise matriarchal society” (270). Later in the novel, Tyler sees a dildo on Marla’s dresser. “ Don’t be afraid. It’s not a threat to you,” Marla says. Tyler’s fear of castration includes this fake penis that threatens to outperform him, again stealing his masculinity (Palahniuk 61). Lastly, at the end of the novel, the narrator, attempting to stop the chaos that Tyler has created tries to turn himself in. At this point, one of the members of Project Mayhem says “ You know the drill, Mr. Durden. You said it yourself. You said, if anyone ever tries to shut down the club, even you, then we have to get him by the nuts” (Palahniuk 187). This time, the narrator leaves himself with no option but to physically lose his masculinity if he tries to retreat from his newly-created male world.

Returning to the creation of “ Fight Club”, Suzanne Clark suggests “ the real danger is an imbalance in the gender wars created by feminism, and Fight Club the self-help group that will let men be men again” (Clark 413). Through the feminization of an increasingly capitalistic society, Tyler (and by extension the narrator), must create Fight Club in an effort to regain their lost masculinity. “ What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised

by women,” the narrator observes (Palahniuk 50). This comment reflects the narrator’s own childhood in a family with an absent father. With no male role model, he (and the other men in Fight Club) turn to more feminized, domestic activities in the matriarchal culture.

In “ Oedipal Obsession”, Paul Kennett explores the oedipal complex found in the narrator. He states “ The narrator considers his crisis of identification to be a crisis of masculinity, and becomes swept up in alter-ego Tyler Durden’s obsessive quest to achieve identification through the classic Oedipal complex” (Kennett 48). If this is the case, his participation in Fight Club and self-violence can be seen as rooted in the Oedipal complex, in which he looks to the created Tyler Durden to provide him with a meaningful identity.

Ta, however, looks toward Freud and the condition of dissociated identity in her analysis of the narrator. She notes that the disempowered male narrator seeks release in a brute, regressive Tyler, suggesting that “ violence is not only symptomatic, but also constitutive, of this condition of dissociated identity” (Ta 265). Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) is, according to Freud, a psychological condition found to be the result of severe childhood trauma or abuse. During the process of mental dissociation, the individual fails to make mental connections between his/herself and their alternate personality. In the case of Fight Club, the narrator must split his personality in order to survive.

Ta suggests the narrator is a mirror of Freud’s “ melancholic sadomasochist who, registering the loss of a love-object, undergoes self-division and splits into a tyrannical superego that punishes a submissive ego that in turn grows

to enjoy the punishment” (Ta 266). As a cog in the corporate machine, the narrator feels victimized by a culture that has stolen his masculinity and thus feels he must protect this masculinity through his unconscious creation of Tyler.

It is here, Ta suggests, that Freud’s theory of melancholia provides a framework for understanding the narrator’s participation in a feminized society while resisting the castrating culture it promotes. Freud states that mourning is the state in which an individual reacts to the loss of a loved person or idea. The person must go through a period of grieving, usually overcoming his/her grief and returning to his pre-loss condition. However, the melancholic subject faces a a different loss. Freud writes:

The object has not perhaps actually died, but has become lost as an object of love. in yet other cases one feels justified in concluding that a loss of the kind has been experienced, but one cannot see clearly what has been lost, and may the more readily suppose that the patient too cannot consciously perceive what it is he has lost . . . this would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an unconscious loss of a love-object, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing unconscious about the loss (155).

In simpler terms, the narrator suffers the loss of a love-object (masculinity) but is not completely aware of his loss. His alter ego, however, is created for the purpose of reclaiming the love-object. As a result of his loss of masculinity, the narrator experiences symptoms matching those of the melancholic. He suffers from depression, sleeplessness, detached from the

outside world and begins to punish himself. Most importantly, however, is the experience of a split in personality.

With this understanding, Ta explains that the narrator “embodies Freud’s description of the melancholic condition” (Ta 273). She continues to explain that it is in his quest to cure his insomnia that leads to the creation of Tyler. “Tyler, then, represents the divided melancholic self . . . invented to punish the ego (the narrator)” (Ta 273).

This theory, combined with the struggle of a capitalistic society, is seen through the stark contrast between the narrator and his other self. In contrast to the narrator’s material filled condo, Tyler’s abandoned house on Paper Street is described as “three stories and a basement” (Palahniuk 57). “Everywhere there are rusted nails to step on or nag your elbow on. . . there’s no lock on the front door from when police or whoever kicked in the door. . . there’s nine layers of wallpaper swelling on the dining-room walls” (Palahniuk 57). Tyler’s house represents his own primitive masculinity.

Fight Club, and later Project Mayhem, represent the narrator’s quest to break free from a capitalist society while reclaiming his masculinity. “When Tyler invented Project Mayhem, Tyler said the goal of Project Mayhem had nothing to do with other people. Tyler didn’t care if other people got hurt or not. The goal was to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history. We, each of us, can take control of the world” (122). Fed up with being drones in a capitalistic society which keeps their power to a minimum, Tyler and the narrator fight against the machine the only way they know how; by destroying society’s rules.

In the culminating scenes of the chaos of Project Mayhem, Tyler calls for the castration of the Seattle Police Commissioner. When face-to-face with the commissioner, Tyler speaks out against the evils of a capitalistic society. “The people you’re trying to step on, we’re everyone you depend on. We’re the people who do your laundry and cook your food and serve your dinner. . . We are cooks and taxi drivers and we know everything about you. . . We control every part of your life” (Palahniuk 166). Seen in this example, Tyler’s organizations have quickly turned into anarchy and chaos. Ta notes the irony in Tyler’s organizations, saying “ Fight Club, and later Project Mayhem, reproduce the same effects of capitalism by creating the illusion of freedom through demands for self-regulation and self punishment. . . these individuals seek relief from an oppressive capitalistic order through means that are equally conforming and repressive” (Ta 267).

The organizations, with their strict demands and seemingly endless lists of rules, mimic the oppressive capitalistic society that the narrator has come to revolt against. In addition to five hundred dollars for personal burial money, “the applicant has to arrive with the following: Two black shirts. Two pairs of trousers. One pair of heavy black shoes. Two pair of black socks and two pair of plain underwear. One heavy black coat. One white towel. . . one white plastic mixing bowl” (Palahniuk 128). Further, as the narrator notices, the men are each trained in teams, each with a job, and no one asking questions. This new “ society” is equally, if not more, repressive than the capitalist society they are trying to escape.

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