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Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Violent Discoveries

**- Three theories on the protagonist's journey
towards self-discovery through the use of violence
in Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club**

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1. Introduction

As a citizen of a western society one has many freedoms. The freedom to make an income, the freedom to express oneself in a variety of ways, and the freedom to help mold the society in which we live in. Many of us see these as fundamental attributes of a just society. When our rights are violated, when they are breached by a politician, by the other sex, or by our parents, we stand up for ourselves and we protest. How we go about doing this is of course dependent on our situation and the severity of the same. Some of us complain to the people closest to us, some of us debate with politicians, and some of us use violence to regain the things that we feel belong to us.

Most ways of expressing discontentment are socially accepted and normalized, but the use of violence is not. Therefore, one can wonder what it is that makes a person use violence when trying to stand up for himself when there are so many other ways of expressing discontentment at our disposal. Is the reason for violence caused by the society we live in, or are there individual aspects behind this kind of behavior?

The following essay examines why the fictional character Jack in the novel *Fight Club* decides to use violent means when expressing disappointment towards society. This is not an essay that deals with the political or managerial functions within a society, nor is it an essay specifically about society. Instead, it is an essay that tries to understand why this individual uses violence as a means of regaining an identity lost because of surrounding circumstances

that are present in western society.

Because this analysis is based on the fictional life of a fictional character in a fictional world, one cannot draw too many parallels to the behavior of real life individuals or societies. However, since this essay will discuss theories that are often used when analyzing real life individuals and societies, it might be possible to draw some parallels to real life scenarios.

1.1 Method

The short novel *Fight Club* written by Chuck Palahniuk is a story that has traces of many themes, including for example; fascism, masculinity, the Oedipal complex, mental disorders, feminist theory, homosexuality, and Marxism. Each of these themes can be highlighted depending on what aspect of the story the reader decides to focus on, and this is also what makes *Fight Club* so complex and difficult to come to grips with. I do however think that the story itself in its core is about a man's desperate struggle to find an identity in a world that has failed him.

The aim of this essay is to try to register how the protagonist Jack, who on the surface seems to have a normal life, ends up in such a dysfunctional and violent environment. Why does he use violence, and what does this tell us about him?

By referring to three theoretical approaches we will track the protagonist's journey towards self-realization and analyze the dysfunctional life it leads to. More specifically, the essay attempts to understand why the protagonist uses violence as a means of finding an identity for himself.

The discussion will be placed in the context of the following perspectives: Marxism/capitalism, masculinity, and the Oedipal Complex. These serve as backdrops in an attempt to understand the use of violence. These theoretical perspectives also inhabit different

levels of consciousness within the character, from the Marxist/capitalist view that is apparent from the very beginning of the story, to the Oedipal complex which demands deeper investigation into Jack's life. Therefore, the analysis of the Marxist/capitalist theory will be more general while masculine theory, and especially the Oedipal complex, will be more complex. The reason for using this method is that in order to understand the violent choices made by the character we need to take all levels of his consciousness into account in order to better understand why he chooses to use such a drastic means of expression.

This essay will present opinions from several sources, on both the theoretical approaches, as well as opinions and analyses of the primary source. It is however important to mention that a few analyses referred to in this essay discuss the film with the same name. Whether or not a source refers to the film or the novel will not be specifically stated in the essay, since I believe that all the opinions and analyses presented in this essay are applicable to the novel. The reader should feel free to investigate, via the "Works Cited" section, if a source deals with the novel or the film. I however, will not make any such distinctions in this text.

2. Theory

2.1 The Marxist view of Capitalism

It is very difficult to describe Marxism in a brief section, and the same is true for capitalism. However, since this essay (and the thoughts and mind of Jack) is more specifically focused on the Marxist view on capitalism, this section will be a brief summary of that particular concept in general. However, in order to give as coherent and understandable overview as possible of the Marxist ideas that corresponds with the modern world depicted in

the novel, the following summary will mainly focus on ideas sprung from a more modernized version of Marxism, called neo-Marxism¹.

The fundamental basis of Marxism is unity. It is unity between people in a society where personal greed and profit are set aside and where we, the people, instead produce “for each other simply because we understand that others need the results of our activity, and we get pleasure and satisfaction from the knowledge that we are accomplishing something worthwhile” (Lebowitz 17-18). In order to accomplish this it is essential for Marxists to establish an awareness within society, so that people want to work together instead of separately, and unite rather than diverge.

Marxists believe capitalistic societies to be divided into two different groups of people; the capitalists and the workers. The capitalists are the “owners of wealth” (Lebowitz 19), and the “owners of physical and material means of production“ (Lebowitz 19), whereas the workers are the ones supplying the means for this to happen. The workers who have nothing to sell in order to have an income sell their labor to the capitalists (Lebowitz 19). Marxists believe that the main goal for capitalists is the growth of their capital, whereas the goal for Marxists is production to everyone’s gain. As they see it, it is the well being of a few, versus the well being of everyone. However, in today’s western world many workers have more income than just the essential means for survival. Lebowitz argues that the word “class” used by Marx no longer applies in the same way as before, since today many would agree that the working class has “learned to see themselves ... as members of the middle class” (Lebowitz 1). In other words, today it is possible for a worker to have capital to spend on things that aren’t necessarily important for survival. From a Marxist point of view this of course could force a worker with Marxist tendencies to struggle with his Marxist beliefs when living in a capitalistic society that

¹ See Oxford Dictionaries online, search term “neo-Marxist”, for a short definition.

tries to convince him that capital is of major importance.

The differences regarding how to use workers are radical between the capitalistic and Marxist ideologies. Marxists believe that capitalism has the worker satisfying “the existing values of valorization (i.e., as a means for growth of capital)” (Lebowitz 35), that they exist in order to make the capitalist hierarchic system stronger and having the working peoples power turned against them, generating the belief that there is no alternative way of functioning; whereas Marxism stands for “the inverse situation, in which objective wealth is there to satisfy the worker’s own need for development” (Lebowitz 33-35).

2.2 Masculinity

When searching for the meaning of the word “masculine” in the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* the following explanation is presented: “having the qualities or appearance thought to be typical of men”. While this is true, it is no easy task to define what a typical man is.

The difficulty lies in trying to describe what the qualities of masculinity are without generalizing and/or making assumptions that some people might take offence to or deem untrue. Exactly what traits are masculine or not are hard to scientifically determine or prove, mainly because it is still uncertain to what degree masculine and female traits are socially conditioned and to what degree they are established as physical qualities (i.e. gender versus sex). Because of this, one could even ask the question if there really is such a thing as masculinity in the current western world. However, one could claim that there seems to be conclusions and assumptions that are more or less true in relation to reality, and in order to draw some kind of conclusion as to what masculinity could mean let’s refer to a few statements on what it *has* meant. A few of these are: that “masculinity has meant freedom, motion and

adventure” (Ehrenreich 286), that 30-40 years ago men did not care about shopping (Ehrenreich 287), nor did they make their own dinner or do the laundry (Ehrenreich 287), instead they worked to make a living. It is evident that the definition of masculinity is not necessarily the domination of women, but rather being the opposite of women. It is possible to claim that the old values of what masculinity means are declining, and that what is being demanded of men and women is drawing closer and closer together due to similar expectations of both sexes. Today, men in the western world are, generally speaking, supposed to do the dishes just as often as women, and shop just as carefully as women. There is however one thing that still separates men from women, and masculinity from femininity - violence. Tim Edwards claims that the “the vast majority” of violent acts in the world are performed by men, and that it therefore is no wonder that violence is considered masculine (44). The same pattern seems to emerge in Joyce Canaan’s research of Wolverhampton kids at the end of the 1980’s, where the young men used violence as a means of expressing their anxieties of being left behind by society, by damaging property and each other as a way of affirming their place in a world that had ridden them of their place and purpose (Canaan 115-119). If we pair this with Nigel Edley’s and Margaret Wetherell’s claim that “men and masculinity has to have the concept of power at its center” (97), it is possible to conclude that the core aspect of masculinity could be violence as a means of expressing or feeling power. One could claim that these are the only fundamentally masculine traits left for men to adopt in order to feel like masculine men. However, like many other things surrounding masculine theory this is nothing more than qualified speculation.

2. 3 The Oedipal complex

The Oedipal complex is a concept developed by Sigmund Freud and functions as a way of

describing a child's first impressions and inner reactions to the world as he is growing up.

Freud claims that this complex has a significant impact on a person's future identity.

In the first phase, when a child is born, his first reaction and behavior is shaped by a sense of union with the mother. The child wants the mother to himself (Freud 308) and sees their relationship as the most important thing in his (or her) life. One could say that the relationship to the mother is perceived by the child as something symbiotic; because the mother satisfies the child's every need (Freud 309). This creates an almost incestuous relationship between the mother and her son (Freud 311), with the child feeling that it has an unsurpassable connection to its mother.

Later, when the father enters the equation, the boy finds the father's presence annoying and this causes the boy to feel agitation towards his new found competitor (Freud 308) who threatens the boy's relationship to the mother by competing for her attention. During this stage the boy is the happiest when the father goes away, leaving the child alone with the mother (Freud 308). Paradoxically however, if the mother goes away, the child can also show signs of affection and love for the father (Freud 308). This is crucial, because as Gunn and Frenz argue in their article (which is based on Lacanian psychoanalysis): "in order to avoid castration by the father, the boy renounces his desire for his mother and enters into an uneasy alliance with his father" (274), basically switching sides of alliance.

Later, as the child grows up and learns about this triangulated relationship, he has to take on the grand challenge of tearing himself away from his parents. It is not until this process is complete that he can transform from a child into an adult (Freud 312). To do this the child has to free himself from the libidinous feelings for his mother and find another, foreign love object, as well as free himself from his father's influence (Freud 312).

If the child for some reason is not taken care of and is not given the attention he needs from his parents at an early age, writer Goethe (quoted by Freud) says that the child as an adult runs

the risk of ending up with the retarded mind of a child inside the body of an adult male with a passion for violence. This, he says metaphorically, can cause the individual to kill his father and make love with his mother (Freud 313). This statement is of particular interest to the reader when reading the following essay.

3. Discussion

3.1 Fighting against Capitalism

I hated my life. I was tired and bored with my job and
my furniture, and I couldn't see any way to change things.

Only end them.

I felt trapped.

I was too complete.

I was too perfect.

I wanted a way out of my tiny life.

(Palahniuk 172-173)

The criticism of capitalism is probably the first thing that strikes most readers when they first start reading *Fight Club*. We meet a main character with a massive anxiety over his life, specifically the hollow consumerism that has enslaved him. He lives in a condominium that he compares to a “filing cabinet for widows and young professionals” (Palahniuk 41), evoking the sense of loneliness and anonymity he is experiencing while living alone among other lonely people separated by “a foot of concrete” (Palahniuk 41). The fact that Jack can’t even open the windows of his apartment (Palahniuk 41) further adds a feeling of entrapment. The apartment

complex serves as a symbol for the claustrophobic life Jack feels he has, where he and his neighbors are separated by cold and lifeless concrete, living their lonely lives without human interaction or any sense of freedom.

The inside of the apartment also mirrors what Jack perceives to be wrong with his life. Even though the inside seems to be full of things, it too, just like the apartment complex as a whole, is hollow and entrapping: “you’re trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you” (Palahniuk 44). Inside the apartment Jack is controlled and ruled by his material possessions. He is locked inside a filing cabinet like a thing rather than a person, spending his time with, and feeling ruled by, material things. Both the outside and, perhaps particularly, the inside of Jack’s home has him trapped in a consumerist state where the lack of human interaction is replaced by material possessions and individualism. But it’s not just his home that contributes to these feelings, even Jack’s job is lonely and without meaningful interactions with others. As Renee D. Lockwood points out, Jack is: “maintaining an effectively solitary profession which essentially gives nothing to a group collective. ... constantly flying around the country on business, living on ‘single-serving’ meals, using single-sample toiletries, and staying in single hotel rooms” (325). He is an “individual described by Marx who denies and represses pleasure in order to be maximally productive; he is the worker who must engage in labor from which he is alienated, and learn to embrace that alienation as a necessary means” (Ta 269). In other words, Jack is an embodiment of Karl Marx’s worker; he lives only to produce, and the product he produces does not give him pleasure or satisfaction on virtually any level.

Jack, who lives a life without true and meaningful human interaction, who is replacing his pornography with IKEA catalogues (Palahniuk 43), his sexuality with consumerism, has to break free. He goes to support groups for various illnesses because he can’t sleep, and maybe because his doctor advises him that “[i]nsomnia is just a symptom of something larger”

(Palahniuk 19), Jack understands that that larger thing is the discontentment he has for his own life and its materialistic loneliness. It is this discontentment that causes him to not sleep and to unconsciously create a solution, a reaction, to his way of living. Jack has realized that he is a personification of capitalism, and his creation Tyler (who is a figment of his imagination) as a consequence, becomes his Marxist counterpart.

One of the first times we meet Tyler Durden is when Jack's apartment has been set ablaze. Standing outside looking at the flames, Jack is approached by the doorman who says: "A lot of young people try to impress the world and buy too many things" (Palahniuk 45). He is describing Jack, and Jack knows it. This is the moment that Jack decides to call Tyler, and this is when they decide to create Fight Club and make a change in his life. At first glance Fight Club merely seems like a way for men to gather and fight each other to blow off steam, like a sports gathering of sorts. But there is something much deeper going on. As mentioned before, Jack feels isolated and alone in his materialistic world, without any meaningful contact with other people. When creating Fight Club he soon realizes that he is not the only one with these feelings, and thus his and Tyler's Fight Club becomes a way to express "the burning desire of the represented men of Generation X to establish elements of the collective within their lives" (Lockwood 325). The fight club becomes a gathering of kindred spirits, and finally Jack feels like he has a true connection with other people, saying:

A lot of best friends meet for the first time at Fight Club. Now I go to meetings or conferences and see faces at conference tables, accountants and junior executives or attorneys with broken noses spreading out like an eggplant under the edges of bandages or they have a couple stitches under an eye or a jaw wired shut. ... We nod to each other (Palahniuk 54).

But what does that mean, kindred spirits? The members of Fight Club, like Jack, feel

isolated and believe they live empty lives, but is that all? No it is not, because if it was, these members could just as easily have joined a football team or play poker together on Friday nights. It is important to remember that this loneliness stems from a capitalistic world that the members no longer want to be a part of.

The situation Jack and his companions are in resembles that of the white working-class young men in Wolverhampton researched by Joyce E. Canaan in 1987/88. She says that “fighting provided working-class young men with means of affirming their place in society” (Canaan 115) and that it offered “important means by which these young men could heighten their experience with a pace and tension unavailable elsewhere” (Canaan 115). Just like the young men in Joyce E. Canaan’s research, Jack and his companions too feel without place in society and lack excitement. The jobs they have and the middle class lives they live offer no challenges, and because it is impossible for them to gain status through their work (where they are merely cogs in a wheel) they have to resort to violence as means of feeling excitement and have power over their own lives.

Therefore, Tyler creates Fight Club to take a stand, and his perception of capitalism as a social crisis becomes “responsible for the recruitment of others. Suffering from similar unresolved problems” (Lockwood 322). This way Fight Club becomes a meeting place for Jack and other people who are discontent with their lives and their roles in society. It is a gathering that asks the question “how do I find my identity in a society that has me trapped?” But Tyler doesn’t settle for asking the question. He wants an answer, and the answer is Project Mayhem.

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 make your bed. We guard you while you sleep. We drive the ambulances. We direct your call. We are cooks and taxi drivers and we know everything about you.

... So don't fuck with us.

(Palahniuk 166)

Project Mayhem takes the restless masses gathered together by the fight club and puts them to use. An overtly Marxist approach, where they do not just philosophize about the class injustices that have them at a disadvantage, but try to change them (Barry 157). "The goal" Tyler says, is 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" (Palahniuk 122). He wants to destroy all manifestations of capitalism so that Jack and the others no longer are "the crap and the slaves of history" (Palahniuk 123) and instead take control over their own lives and identities. With the help of Project Mayhem he seeks to initiate a "complete and right-away destruction of civilization" (Palahniuk 125) creating a world without hierarchy where everyone starts again from zero, thus getting rid of the class-system and the importance of capital as a means of power. Referring back to the research made by Joyce E. Canaan, Tyler and his followers do exactly what the young men who are described in the research do, damaging "consumer item[s] which signified the wide gulf separating their limited consumption from that of their middle-class counterparts" (117-118).

After a while Tyler/Jack increases the intensity in Project Mayhem, he becomes an even more powerful leader than before and decreases the individualism of his followers further. Examples of this are shaving everyone's heads, having them dress in the same clothing, as well as physically marking them in the same way. He does this to make the organization more organized in order to achieve his goals and also to create the belief that his and other's actions, and he, as an individual, matters, a belief that he was lacking in the beginning of the novel. Ironically, removing the things that outwardly make the individuals unique makes them feel special. Because now, as opposed to before, they feel as though they are a part of a whole, of

something important, that they matter and have a meaningful role in their own and other people's lives which was not the case before. Žižek (cited by Kennett) argues: "the development of Project Mayhem pushes the successful revolution so that it becomes a 'fascist organization' that is 'directed outwards'" (Kennett 54-55). This more organized, fascist version of Fight Club fits perfectly well with Tyler's wish to take the Fight Club propaganda on to the streets, and so he does. He orders his troops to start fights with strangers, vandalize cultural monuments, and ultimately - blow up major corporate buildings. These outward acts take one big step away from his initial philosophy of sharing his newly found revelation, to now forcing his philosophy upon the rest of society, saying that: "Like fight club does with clerks and box boys, Project Mayhem will break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world." (Palahniuk 125). This way "Project Mayhem' becomes the ultimate response" to capitalism (Lockwood 327) and the ultimate tool to self-realization.

Project Mayhem grows enormously; it tightens its organization to the point of being militaristic, even having sub-groups specializing in different aspects of this corporate homicide. But it will not last. Jack learns that Tyler is just a figment of his imagination and that they are the same person. At the same time he realizes the extreme measures that the members of Project Mayhem are willing to resort to in the fight for a Marxist community. This rocks Jack's perception of why he is doing these things, and when he "realizes that Project Mayhem is not just a story of revolution, not just an ideal ... therapeutic space, but rather a physical organization that actually harms people, the Narrator becomes horrified and feels the weight of his personal responsibility" (Kennett 59), and decides to put an end to the revolution which he himself created. In the end, Jack realizes that Tyler has lost his purpose and that the actions brought on by Tyler no longer serve as a way for Jack to define his personality but is instead forces violence on other people.

In a way, Jack's mental progression and journey into the dark world of Tyler goes hand in hand with the evolution of ideology that he goes through. He goes from a poster boy for capitalism (although a very depressing one), to a spiritual leader, on to a revolutionary leader, to lastly leaving the role of leader. At the same time as this is happening, he plummets further and further down into Tyler's world, from living at home in his condominium by himself buying furniture from IKEA, to sleeping in Tyler's villa amongst the other so called "space monkeys" fighting each night, and at the end renouncing Tyler.

It is impossible to read and analyze *Fight Club* without recognizing its Marxist perspective and fascist reaction to society. In *Fight Club*, "fascism and Marxism really do engage in a parallel critique of capitalism's limits" (Bennett 93) through the use of violence.

3.2 Fighting with Masculinity

I'm a thirty-year-old boy, and I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer I need

(Palahniuk 51)

Even though *Fight Club* in many ways can be read as criticism of present day capitalist culture, there is more to the novel than that. As Kate Greenwood writes:

It is curious that Tyler carries out this tirade [of rebelling against capitalist consumption] while consuming mass-produced beer and cigarettes. *Fight Club* overtly criticises 'feminine' modes of consumption—agonising over which ruffled valance to buy; taking pride in one's home wares and condiments. However, this is undercut by its

complicity with more 'masculine' modes of consumption—smoking and drinking - which are contingent on the rugged mode of masculinity it promotes. *Fight Club* does not only depict postmodern subjectivity in general as in crisis; rather, the suggestion is that in the postmodern era masculine subjectivity in particular is in trouble (Greenwood paragraph 5).

What Kate Greenwood is suggesting is that *Fight Club*, and therefore Jack as well, makes a difference between female and male consumption, criticizing female modes of consumption and favoring male. And she has a point. As I suggested in the previous part Jack is heavily depressed over the fact that he is a slave to consumption, a slave to the “nesting instinct” (Palahniuk 43) which traditionally has been seen as a female attribute; taking care of the home and nesting for the sake of her family and children while the man is out. The consumerist lifestyle Jack lives has him going nowhere. His job seems to offer him no excitement, no sense of accomplishment and the apartment he inhabits feels claustrophobic. Therefore, the ways with which a man can have a sense of a masculine identity seem out of reach to him. As Ehrenreich puts it: “masculinity has meant freedom, motion, and adventure, while women stood for entrapment, stasis, and ‘civilization’” (286). This female role has taken a hold of Jack, having him consuming things that are traditionally female. Later, when Tyler enters the equation, they drink “a lot of beer” (Palahniuk 46) and start hitting each other in the face. With Tyler, Jack goes from sitting at home buying material possessions that raise the quality of his home living, to going outside consuming beer and fighting. These can be seen as two extremes of male and female roles, and in order to escape the feeling of feminization through consumption and stasis “[a] melancholic Jack must project his desire for masculinity onto Tyler, who is the hyper masculine embodiment of Jack’s lost ‘manhood’” (Ta 272), a manhood lost due to heavy traditional female consumption and a lack of other alternatives of maintaining

a masculine identity. This rebellion can be seen in other parts of the novel as well, like when a newly enlightened, more macho Jack rebels against his boss, who “tells Microsoft how he chose a particular shade of pale cornflower blue for an icon” (Palahniuk 48) and who wears a “signet ring ... wrapped in his smooth soft hand“ (Palahniuk 48). When feminizing his boss while Jack himself is taking part in traditional male activities (fighting in particular), Jack (and Tyler) not only rebels against capitalism as a means of class oppression (employer against employee), but also against the feminization of men in a capitalistic consumerist society.

The theme of feminization is most present in the beginning of the novel, before Jack fully enters the world of Tyler. When he visits group therapy sessions he does so trying to cure his insomnia. For a while he succeeds with curing it, but the question is how? When discussing the feminization and loss of masculinity that the protagonist is feeling, the perhaps most revealing sessions are those with the group for testicular cancer. Lynn M. Ta says that: “Here [in the support group], he is able to find comfort among other men who have also experienced a sense of masculine loss, but for the men in the group, their emasculation is a physiological one while Jack’s is psychological. Therefore, Jack’s fear of castration is alleviated in the presence of men who have undergone actual castration” (270). This means that Jack, when surrounded by men who have physically lost their manhood, regains some of his manliness because he at least physically is still a man. In these groups he can relax, he can cry with the others over the loss of manhood without having to worry about the pressures from the outside world, all the while feeling superior to the others in the group. Jack saying for example: “We all work so hard all the time” (Palahniuk 18), perhaps referring to pressure of earning or maintaining a male identity.

What is interesting though is that as soon as the female character Marla enters the sessions, they no longer work for him. Jack states that “Marla Singer ... stole the support groups from

me”, (Palahniuk 53), “I can’t cry with this woman watching me” (Palahniuk 22), and maybe that is the problem, that she is a woman. Maybe Marla, as someone who like him fakes her illness, as well as being a woman, exposes him as a man without control, which isn’t considered masculine but feminine. The refuge that the groups offer from the pressures of being a man is destroyed, and the anxieties Jack feels over not being manly enough are exposed by someone who can see his true nature, and this is intensified by the fact that the person is a woman. Ultimately, “Marla’s power to destroy the only effective therapy known to Jack with her sheer presence is clearly symbolic of the underlying fear of a new society dominated by the feminine“ (Lockwood 324). After this, Jack resents Marla almost throughout the entire novel and in order to cope with her feminine power over him he has to come up with something, or someone, that can restore his masculinity. And that someone is Tyler Durden.

Lynn M. Ta says, “[v]ictimimized and feminized by his culture, a melancholic Jack ... seeks to recover what he perceives to be his lost masculinity by resorting to violent measures and in doing so, splits into a sadistic (and masculine) Tyler who criticizes and punishes a masochistic (and feminine) Jack.” (266). The violence is the most important aspect in Jack’s transformation from his feminized self into Tyler’s masculine world. The violence takes many forms throughout the novel; he uses violence against other men, he uses psychological violence against Marla, he uses violence to try and change society, and he uses violence against himself through Tyler. The violence he exposes himself and others to becomes the ultimate manifestation of masculinity, maybe because “the vast majority of violent actions in the world are performed by men” (Edwards 44), it is the one thing that truly separates him from the women in a society where all other boundaries are slowly breaking down. “[T]he answer to the question ‘Is violence masculine?’ is commonly a resounding ‘Yes’” (Edwards 44), leaving Jack no other choice but to use violence as a means of affirming his masculinity when everything else fails. The violence is a tool in the search for power over his own life, and since “an

increasing number of social scientists appear to agree ... [that] any adequate theory of men and masculinity has to have a concept of power at its centre” (Edley and Wetherell 97), it becomes clear that the purpose for the violence is not just for a thrill or excitement, but also an attempt to take control over a life which the protagonist feels he has lost a grip of.

What means of affirming his masculinity does Jack put in to use through Tyler? If we were to glance over at a draft of Nigel Edley’s and Margaret Wetherell’s list of supposed masculine traits, we find that many can be applied to Jack and Tyler:

- “No sissy stuff” - which stands for the avoidance of all feminine behaviors and traits.
- “The big wheel” - standing for the acquisition of success, status and breadwinning competence. ...
- “Give ‘em hell” - standing for aggression, violence and daring (101)

The discussion we were just having on the importance of violence can most evidently be found in the “Give ‘em hell” category, Jack showing to himself and others that he can be daring, violent and aggressive through fighting and inflicting, as well as receiving, pain.

As for the “No sissy stuff” category, there are several instances where he deliberately avoids association with typically female traits. One is the previously mentioned scene with his boss, depicting him with despite over his feminine traits. Instead, because of the constant violence and the injuries it inflicts, Jack’s and Tyler’s creation is the opposite of feminine grooming; “fight club isn’t about looking good” (Palahniuk 51) instead it is opposing the idea of improving your appearance and “looking the way a sculptor or an art director says” (Palahniuk 50).

The creation of Fight Club and Project Mayhem can easily be recognized as reactions to the second point on the list, “The big wheel”. With Fight Club and Project Mayhem, and the fascist

tendencies they have, Tyler builds an army of followers that are eternally faithful and undoubting. He becomes a leader and a hero that leads his followers and the world towards what he perceives to be a better life, and because of this he receives status and respect. This gives him a sense of identity because the status he has defines him in the eyes of the others, and coupled with the fact that he is a spokesperson for violence, it (in a sense) makes him a truly masculine male.

The differences that separate Jack and Tyler are apparent in the novel, with the feminized Jack desperately trying to follow Tyler into his world of masculinity. It can be seen as a struggle between the conscious feminine identity that Jack has and the unconscious desire for a masculine identity that he wants. With the creation of Tyler and subsequently Fight Club and Project Mayhem, “Jack is able to take up both masculine and feminine positions, thereby allowing himself to occupy the role of victim while simultaneously retaining his virility” (Ta 266). Although I understand that Jack’s split personality can be interpreted as a result of a psychological illness with all that it entails in the field of psychology, it might still be possible that Jack, if he wanted to, could fully adopt the personality of Tyler. The reason he does not, in my interpretation, is that he throughout *Fight Club* is struggling with his feminine and masculine sides, trying to come to grips with who he wants to be. The reason for Jack staying Jack and not becoming Tyler permanently is that he is unsure of how much of a “masculine” violent man he wants to be, and how much of a “feminine” passive man he wants to be. This is the reason for his split personality and this is why Jack adopts some of Tyler’s ideas and personality traits, but not all of them. Tyler constantly pushes Jack further and further down the path to extreme masculinity and violent behavior, but with the creation of Project Mayhem and the severe effects it proposes to force on society and life as a whole, Jack understands what his limits are and decides to stop the transformation before it reaches its full conclusion, because

giving in to Tyler's desires would make him more "masculine" and more violent than he wants to be.

3.3 Fighting with Oedipal complex

It's safe to say that the critique of capitalism and the quest for a masculine identity are two of the most important and dominant themes in the character's life throughout the novel. But it cannot stop there. In order to fully understand the character's journey we need to understand his relationship to the part of him that makes the journey possible. The heaviest emphasis in the novel is on the relationship between Jack and Tyler, they are at each other's side during the majority of the story and even though Tyler is made out of Jack's desires, we need to take a closer look at their relationship and try to decipher why and what it is. Joshua Gunn and Thomas Frenzt have done exactly that. With the help of Lacan's ideas they argue that: "the so-called masculine violence depicted by *Fight Club* reflects the protagonist's inability to establish an identity for himself as a result of a failed paternal intervention. The consequent psychosis staged by *Fight Club*, we argue, is expressive of a larger, cultural decline of the father figure." (Gunn and Frenzt 269). They continue; "As some critics have noted, owing to its explicit critique of fathers and deity, the social anxieties that concern *Fight Club* are classically Oedipal in nature, ... not simply concerned with models of masculinity, but paternal models in particular" (Gunn and Frenzt 270). They are suggesting that *Fight Club* is not just a critique of capitalism and/or the masculine anxieties put on men in current western society, but also that these issues have a paternal reason for existing.

But what can we say about this issue from Jack's point of view? How does this affect Jack? Gunn and Frenzt argue that Jack struggles with an Oedipal complex where Jack creates Tyler because he lacks a male role model, a father. This means that the father figure in *Fight Club* is

metaphorical in the form of Tyler, substituting the biological father who is absent from the story and quite likely from Jack's life in general. We will get back to the biological father, but first let us take a look at how he creates his substitute father.

When we meet Jack he is living a consumerist life, suffering from insomnia, alone in his condominium without thrills or excitement. The insomnia, which he describes as a feeling where "you can't touch anything and nothing can touch you" (Palahniuk 21), symbolizes Jack being "trapped within the womb of late capitalism", in a "seemingly zombified existence as a supplicant, a form of infantilism" (Gunn and Frenz 282). You could say that the capitalistic life he is living acts as a metaphorical mother. This mother keeps him in her womb where he is action-less and feels safe and alive physically, without truly living emotionally.

After a while though, Jack grows tired of the insomnia (the womb) and wants to cure it (be born). So he goes to the group therapy sessions and meets Bob. When Jack describes Bob's big breasts and caring embrace, holding Jack in his arms and letting him cry, it is clear that Bob acts as "a stand-in for Jack's mother figure" (Ta 270). I argue that going to the therapy sessions enables Jack to leave the lonely and claustrophobic womb of capitalism and take on Bob as his new mother figure. He escapes the claustrophobic womb and finds a human mother who can provide him with human emotional care. But this doesn't last long, because shortly thereafter he meets Marla Singer. With Marla in the sessions he can no longer cry, and no longer sleep. Why this is the case is hard to say. Maybe because she as the only biological woman in the testicular cancer group, reminds him that he has no true female mother figure. Maybe she exposes him to his own vulnerability and weakness by enabling him to see himself from an outside perspective. Or maybe she, by also being someone who fakes her illness, confronts him with the fact that the motherly care he is being given is based on lies and therefore will not last. It is hard to say exactly how, but she ruins Jack's comfort in Bob's care,

thereby destroying his new mother figure and the sense of security and love that he offers. This realization causes Jack to slip back into insomnia and the womb, a state that he has grown tired of being in.

Shortly after this we learn that he meets Tyler Durden. In order for Jack to escape the womb and the mother figure that is capitalism, he needs something that breaks the bond to his mother. He needs to create a father figure in order to get the opportunity to understand that he is separate from his mother. Gunn and Frenz say that: “the father figure, which can be represented by any third person independent of sex or gender—introduces a ‘cut’ into the dyad and triangulates it. This intervention makes it possible for the infant to think about objects as representative of other things” (275). Tyler makes Jack “understand the external world through difference” (276) and that his way of living, his relationship to his mother, is not a must and that he is his own unique individual and separate from his mother. Tyler does this by presenting an alternative way of life different from that of the capitalistic mother. Keep in mind though that Jack creates Tyler subconsciously. Jack has a need to define himself and since the capitalistic mother cannot help him do this, he subconsciously creates a father that can force him to realize that he is an individual.

The reason for Jack creating Tyler as a substitute father is linked to the fact that his biological father never has been there for him. This becomes especially apparent in a dialogue between Jack and a mechanic, with the mechanic saying: “if you never know your father, if your father bails out or is never at home, what do you believe about God? ... What you end up doing ... is you spend your life searching for a father and a God” (Palahniuk 141). The mechanic is describing Jack’s situation where he, lacking a father, searches for someone to shoulder the responsibilities of his biological father. Jack’s biological father didn’t seem to provide Jack with answers to the questions that he had about life, one example is Jack saying:

“After college, I called him long distance and said, now what? My dad didn’t know. When I got a job and turned twenty-five, long distance, I said, now what? My dad didn’t know, so he said, get married” (Palahniuk 51). With this in mind, it is definitely possible to argue that the reason for Jack to create Tyler is that his real father never gave him a chance to completely break free from his mother, and instead trapping him in a state where he understood that he was separate from his mother but without having a father to rely on. When Jack later in life grows up and moves away from his real mother, he still has a strong need for a mother figure. Therefore, capitalism takes the place of his birthmother who he has now left, and Tyler has to fulfill the role of father figure that Jack’s biological father never took. Later on in the novel, after a fight, Jack asks Tyler what he has been fighting and “Tyler said, his father” (Palahniuk 53). This is important, because it is the need to physically fight his father that drives Jack/Tyler to violence. When he is fighting others in Fight Club he is, in a sense, fighting his biological father with the help of his metaphorical one. He is fighting his biological father because he failed to give his son a chance to be with him and identify with him. The Oedipal theory states that the son first hates the father for competing over the mother’s affection, and then decides to take sides with his father and try to shape his identity in the father’s image. In *Fight Club* though, Jack still has the urge to fight his biological father because he is still competing with him over the mother, due to the fact that his father was never around for Jack to identify with him. With the creation of Tyler however, the father who has the son follow in his footsteps still exists thus completing this phase of the Oedipal complex.

When Tyler forms Fight Club, he becomes Jack’s and the members’ father figure, while society is the capitalistic mother. But in order to create a father figure on the same scale as the societal capitalistic mother and truly separate the son from the mother, there has to be a father that can compete with the mother on the same terms. This means that in order for Tyler to tear

Jack from capitalism, there needs to be a Marxist force capable of competing with the capitalistic one. Gunn and Frenzt argue: “If we read the Oedipal configuration of *Fight Club* in terms of situating consumer-capitalism as the mother, then the true institutionalized father figure ... is Project Mayhem“(Gunn and Frenzt 282). Project Mayhem and its Marxist/fascist ideology becomes the ultimate response to capitalism, thereby becoming the ultimate father that can create the rift between the mother and the son.

Towards the end of the novel however, Jack wants out of Project Mayhem and his relationship with Tyler, and in the end Jack actually “kills“ Tyler in true Oedipal manner by putting a gun to his mouth and pulling the trigger. The key to this happening is that he, when talking to Marla, realizes that he and Tyler are the same person. Marla ruins Jack’s perception of Tyler as a real person and as a father just like she ruined Bob’s role as a mother figure by making Jack realize that that relationship wasn’t real. Jack realizes that he is Tyler, that he essentially has been his own father, thus eliminating the need for Tyler since Jack now has become a fully developed individual with his own identity. In other words, Jack grows up, realizing that he doesn’t need a father figure to make sense of the world around him, and that he can make his own decisions. The last phase of the complex is completed because of Marla, who in some ways fits the profile of a mother figure who is always arguing with him as a mother argues with a child, and as Gunn and Frenzt point out: “In true Oedipal spirit, Marla mothers the Narrator most centrally by having sex with the alter ego Tyler” (Gunn and Frenzt 285), who as we have concluded is Jack’s metaphorical father. Because of this, she ends Jack’s Oedipal complex near the end of the novel when Jack finally realizes his love for her. At the end he is “signaling ... [his] acceptance of Marla as an appropriate female love object” (Gunn and Frenzt 286), thus completing the last phase of the Oedipal complex by turning to a mother figure with sexual desire.

In *Fight Club* Jack goes through the phases that are typical for the Oedipal complex, and it can be argued that he in the end has gone through the complex in its entirety. From perceiving his mother figure and himself as one, to recognizing the father and disowning the mother, to hating him, to following in his footsteps, and in the end finding a sexual partner with motherly qualities who completes the process. I believe that it is perfectly possible to explain Jack's journey into the dark and violent life of Tyler in this manner. Creating Tyler is Jack's way of trying to find an identity and stability due to the lack of stability from a paternal role model.

3. 4 Why Tyler?

If I could wake up in a different place, at a different time, could I wake up as a different person?

(Palahniuk 33)

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what causes Jack to create Tyler. As I mentioned in the introduction, *Fight Club* is a complex novel with many representations of modern day society and its themes, but it's a novel that to its core is a story about a man's journey from a normal life to a dysfunctional one. What is interesting though is the almost caricatured depiction of "normal life" that Jack experiences in the beginning of the novel. The feelings of emptiness and apathy are in their extremes, and even though many of us can recognize and understand the feelings that Jack has towards his life, it is hard to completely identify with him. It is not difficult to label his subsequent life with Tyler as abnormal and extreme in its deviancy, but it's easy to forget that his life before Tyler also is far from "normal" and in many ways just as dysfunctional.

I have chosen three critical approaches partly because I think that they are the most interesting and most relevant, but also in part because each of them represent three different levels of consciousness. The first, the Marxist/capitalist approach, is obvious to both the reader and Jack almost from the first page of the story with Jack referring to the Marxist idea of alienation, saying: “You do the little job you’re trained to do. Pull a lever. Push a button. You don’t understand any of it, and then you just die” (Palahniuk 12). Jack, and later also Tyler, discuss the faults of capitalism throughout the rest of the novel and actively try to destroy it. Jack bluntly blames capitalism for his miserable life, and the creation of Tyler and the violence they experience becomes an obvious solution to this problem.

However, as Kate Greenwood points out, he is not just rebelling against capitalism as a whole. Instead, it is the feminization of men that he is particularly upset about. Although it is capitalism as a whole that he revolts against later on in the novel through Project Mayhem, it is clear that it is the feminizing attribute of capitalism preventing Jack from finding an identity that is the main reason for Jack to create Tyler in the beginning. Tyler creating Project Mayhem and literally taking the fight against capitalism to new heights, away from the feminization of Jack, could very well be a contributing factor to Jack’s decision to abandon Tyler. Jack unconsciously understands that Project Mayhem moves away from his own personal problems of loss of masculinity and into the public sphere and therefore decides to get rid of Tyler who is trying to solve things that he was not intended to solve.

That he is fighting with an Oedipal complex on the other hand, never enters Jack’s mind. He mentions his father several times during the story, so it becomes clear that he is well aware of the fact that his father has failed him. He does however fail to recognize Bob’s obvious role as a mother, capitalism’s metaphorical role as a mother figure, and most crucially Tyler’s role as a father. When he accepts Marla as an object of desire, as someone to love, he has no idea of

how crucial the acceptance of her is to him, and how much the Oedipal complex has controlled him through the violent journey to self-discovery.

One can say that Jack consciously revolts against capitalism, while in part understanding that this desire originates from a fear of being feminized, but without realizing that he in fact also is living out an Oedipal complex.

With this in mind, it is possible to argue that these themes, if looked at in reverse, are intertwined to the point of being inseparable. I believe that it's impossible to discuss the protagonist's Oedipal complex without also discussing his need for a masculine role model that separates him from feminization, just as I believe it impossible to discuss his fear of masculinity loss without also taking into account his uneasy relationship to the consumerism that creates that fear. Perhaps the fact that Jack has several problems, both conscious and subconscious, and that they all are intertwined and affect each other is the real problem. The many problems and their complex intertwinement are too complex for Jack to solve in a conventional way, which leaves him with no other choice but to resort to drastic measures in order to come to grips with his identity and his life.

It is important to remember that Jack is not the only one in this novel to suffer from these problems. His followers in Fight Club, and especially later in Project Mayhem, seem to have some of the same issues as our protagonist. This is supported by the fact that they decide to solve their anxieties by literally fighting capitalism to break free from feminization. We can only speculate over the relevance of the Oedipal complex in these cases (the fact that they need a strong male leader and are willing to follow his every command makes it possible to at least consider the fact of an Oedipal complex being present), but either way it is clear that the followers are experiencing the same frustrations about life as Jack is. These followers serve an important role as they prove to Jack that his desire for another life is shared with others and their acceptance of his solutions to make that happen convinces him that he is doing the right

thing. This further convinces him that he is on the right track in creating an identity and this helps him to slip further down the “rabbit hole”, into the life of Tyler and the violence that such a life entails.

The core story in this novel is the search for an identity through means of violence. This is crucial to Jack, and even though violence appears to be the answer throughout most of the novel, the ending makes it clear that this is not the case. It is not the use of violence as an expression that shapes Jack’s identity at the end, but rather the realization that it is without violence that one can truly form one’s true identity. Jack blames capitalism, feminization, and his father for his feelings of lost identity and he punishes them all with violence. But at the end he realizes that it’s not with violence that he can find his identity, but without it.

4. Conclusion

The violent behavior displayed by *Fight Club*’s protagonist has many different reasons depending on what the reader decides to focus on. In this essay the focus has been on three critical perspectives: Marxism and capitalism, masculinity, and the Oedipal complex. All of these approaches present viable reasons for Jack’s violent behavior and search for an identity. The fact that they represent different levels of consciousness for the protagonist presents the possibility that all of them are active reasons for Jack to behave the way he does, since none of them exclude another and all of them are active in different parts of Jack’s life. Because of this I argue that in order to fully understand the reason for Jack’s violence as a means of creating an identity the reader has to understand that the problem is threefold. I urge the reader to consider the importance of other themes in the story as well, but there should be no question regarding the importance of Marxism, masculinity, and the Oedipal complex in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*.

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