

Undergraduate Dissertation

Trabajo Fin de Grado

The Tip of the Iceberg: Chuck Palahniuk and His
Style as a Means to Understand *Fight Club*

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Abstract: This essay aims to analyse Chuck Palahniuk and his style for a better understanding of *Fight Club*. Starting with the most relevant aspects of his personal life that contribute to the writing of the novel, Palahniuk wisely depicts them in his book through themes such as alienation, emasculation or blue-collar jobs, among others. The reception of the novel helps the reader understand different ways of reading it: at face value or at a more in-depth one. Critics give pieces of advice for better reading and to prevent readers from taking the novel and his notorious protagonist, Tyler Durden seriously. The ironic style Palahniuk uses in *Fight Club* focusing on Blank fiction and Minimalism makes the reader an active one because it is difficult to recognise the satirist Palahniuk who criticises the principal issues of society by mocking them. Thus, a rereading of the novel is necessary for a better interpretation of what Palahniuk wants to transmit: Moral values.

Resumen: El objetivo de este trabajo de fin de grado es analizar Chuck Palahniuk y su estilo para un mejor entendimiento de *El Club de la Lucha*. Empezando por los aspectos mas importantes de su vida que contribuyen a la creación de la novela, Palahniuk los representa sabiamente en la misma a través de temas como el aislamiento, la emasculación o trabajos humildes, entre otros. La recepción que tiene la novela ayuda al lector a entender diferentes lecturas de la obra: Al pie de la letra o de una forma más detallada. Los críticos dan consejos para una mejor lectura y así evitar que los lectores se tomen la novela y a su notorio protagonista Tyler Durden en serio. El estilo irónico que Palahniuk utiliza en *El Club de la Lucha*, enfocándolo en la ficción en Blanco y el Minimalismo hace que el lector esté activo en la lectura porque es complicado reconocer a Palahniuk el sátiro, el cual critica los principales problemas de la sociedad parodiándolos. De este modo, una relectura de la novela es necesaria para una mejor interpretación de lo que Palahniuk quiere transmitir: Valores morales.

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1. Introduction

The main aim of this work is to give a detailed explanation of how Chuck Palahniuk thinks and works to create *Fight Club* so it can give a better understanding for the novel. In order to do so, this essay examines three sections: Palahniuk's real-life experience that helps to create the novel, the reaction of the people when *Fight Club* is released, and the mode and style that he uses in the novel.

The first section deals with the main aspects that left a mark in Palahniuk's life, which influence the creation of the novel. It explains how these experiences are widely portrayed in it. The main aspects that this part covers are the fear of alienation from society for being different that Palahniuk experienced at school, portrayed as the consumerist society in the novel. The emasculation of men depicted in the novel is based on Palahniuk's experience at high school about how to be more masculine. Next, the absent father in the novel, which brings some chaos to the narrator and his state of mind belongs to the author's real issues with his parents. Later, the blue-collar job experience as a mechanic and the continuous brawls help Palahniuk to create the novel and illustrates his frustration through the narrator. Then, the fake situation of the narrator at support groups represents the misunderstanding that Palahniuk has with terminal patients when he escorts them. Finally, Tyler's rebel actions are based on real stories that people tell Palahniuk, so he captures them in the novel.

The second section explains the reception of the novel. The context of the nineties and the X generation are included in order to understand the impact of *Fight Club* because it deals with these concepts. Furthermore, People feel identified with the novel because Palahniuk portrays their concerns and feelings. However, many readers interpret the novel at face value, and it can lead to misinterpretations. That is why,

critics explain some passages that can create confusion such as the extreme violence on the bodies, the mental disorders of the narrator or the antihero Tyler Durden. In this part, Tyler is one of the main reasons why the reader feels strongly related, as he is categorised as an idol of the masses because of his revolutionary actions. After that, some critics take the novel at face value, and the most controversial aspect is Project Mayhem, which for some, supports fascism and terrorism. However, the truth is that Palahniuk is a satirist and ironizes this aspect, among others.

The last section deals with an ironic style that criticises the main concerns of the nineties. However, his irony has an ambiguous meaning that leads to misunderstandings or misinterpretations because he mocks the same subjects that he praises, such as the emasculated men or Project Mayhem. Palahniuk knows about the difficulties to understand his works, so he collects pieces of advice to understand his writings in *Stranger Than Fiction*. Moreover, the author knows about the moral emptiness that reigns in society, so he wants to add ethical values to his works and to do so, he uses the literary trend called Blank fiction and relies on a literary style called Minimalism. Even though these features do not deal with morals, Palahniuk goes one step further and includes ethical purposes. He uses Blank Fiction to create strong reactions on the readers while Minimalism aims to create a judgement on the reader about what is happening. Thus, both literary trend and style, together with the quest for ethical values, aims to create an active opinion on the reader about his own life.

2. Palahniuk and the Writing of Fight Club

2.1 Experiences that led to the creation of the novel

In order to know the novel, first, one needs to know more about the author. This section concentrates on the main aspects of the life of Chuck Palahniuk that contributed to the

making of *Fight Club*. The idea of alienation from society terrified Palahniuk. It started at school because he could not read or write until age nine, when he got his first pair of glasses, and Palahniuk believed that the other kids would marginalize him because of his sight problem (Keesey 1). Palahniuk addresses this fear in *Fight Club*, where the protagonist feels alienated if he does not fit in society. That is to say, consumerist society isolates people that do not adapt to the rules of materialism imposed by the Status Quo and Mass media. For instance, the narrator talks about a Chinese tradition that everybody learns on television, ‘According to the ancient Chinese custom we all learned from television, Tyler is responsible for Marla, forever, because Tyler saved Marla’s life’ (*Fight Club*, 60). That means television as part of the mass media, educates people about what to do and how to behave. The fact that Marla is treated as an object rather than a human being is part of the influence of the consumerist society, based on materialism. Moreover, Keesey states that Palahniuk’s high school period was not a pleasant one, because students that felt different from the rest as well as vulnerable ones were bullied. They could not complain because the principal would hit them, too (2). Therefore, Palahniuk’s high school experience associates the previous idea of alienation with the discomfort of the people that do not fit in society as happens in *Fight Club*. They either adapt to the new consumerist society or they perish because there is no place for weak or different people in the new world. An example of how a person has to adapt into society in *Fight Club* is when the narrator asks his father what should he do in life: ‘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’ (*Fight Club*, 51). These ‘advices’ his dad gives the narrator are some of the aims people have to achieve so they can fit in society, that is, go to college, have a job or start a family, among others. Otherwise, they will feel

displaced from society. The narrator assembles the first two goals, but he hesitates about the third one meaning that he is more or less, alienated. 'I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer I need' (*Fight Club* 51).

Still, in high school, Palahniuk received specialised coaching on how to be more masculine, which included how to lift weights at the gym, because teachers thought he was not boy enough (Keeseey 2). Palahniuk portrays this memory in the book as a topic of emasculation. A generation of men included the narrator, frightened about losing their masculinity. This is how the narrator sees the gyms, 'The gyms you go to are crowded with guys trying to look like men, as if being a man means looking the way a sculptor or an art director says' (*Fight Club* 50). So, Palahniuk uses irony to mock the teachers that told him he was not masculine enough by putting gyms as hiding places for people who fear emasculation and lift weights to feel more masculine.

One undeniable influence on Palahniuk's life is his parents. More specifically, his father. It is not a cordial relationship, as Douglas Keeseey says:

His parents eventually divorced, when he was only thirteen. Palahniuk has since suffered from years of anxiety and insomnia, which he traces back to his time spent as a child in the midst of an acrimonious marriage. At age eighteen, he did learn a family secret that he said has helped him to understand that his father never had a model for how to be in a happy marriage: Palahniuk found out that his paternal grandfather had killed his grandmother and then himself when Palahniuk's father was still a young boy (2).

The lack of a happy marriage in his childhood, makes an impact on Palahniuk. In the novel, this experience is portrayed in different ways. Firstly, the author depicts his background through the narrator: 'This is exactly how my parents were invisible to each other. Then my father went off to start another franchise' (*Fight Club* 66). The narrator tells the reader the situation between his parents which is awful. Besides, Palahniuk uses

the word franchise wisely. It is another example of the effect of the consumerist society because the narrator sees family as a business; that is why he calls it a franchise. So, the narrator says that his father abandoned him and his mother to create another family in another place. Since Tyler and the narrator are the same people, it is the narrator who fights his father even though he says he does not remember anything about him. So, it is a metaphorical fight with the memory of the father figure because the narrator blames him for his actual life situation. Palahniuk makes the father figure essential for the growth of the child. In the novel, the author illustrates the aftermath of people that grew up without the presence of a father: 'Maybe we didn't need a father to complete ourselves' (*Fight Club* 54). In this case, Palahniuk ironizes what the narrator thinks about the father figure. He has schizophrenia along with a double personality, the absence of his father in his development as a child plays a fundamental role on the mental problems he endures in his adult life. Furthermore, there are a couple of issues connected with this father figure experience that helped Palahniuk to create *Fight Club*. As Douglas Keesey points out, the first one was a television program about men of street gangs that grew up without fathers helping each other (21). The second one was *The sibling society* by Robert Bly, which states that children that did not have a father figure had difficulties in dealing with male anger (21). So, Palahniuk gathers his personal experience together with the two influences just mentioned above to create men that have issues with their fathers in the novel.

Moving on to another aspect of Palahniuk's life, he graduated in journalism but could not find a proper job to pay his debts, so he had to look for another type of job. He spent thirteen years as a mechanic at a diesel truck, a job that brought disillusionment and anger to the author which vented brawling at work, one of which helped to the creation of the novel (Keesey 3). Due to his experience as a mechanic, Palahniuk gives an essential role in the novel to this figure. He is not a simple space monkey that follows orders like

a flock of sheep. Palahniuk gives power to the mechanic in order to push the narrator to the limit, much like Tyler does. He takes the narrator in a life-or-death situation in an attempt to crash the car they are driving, and the mechanic forces the narrator to say his true feelings, what he wants to do in his life: 'With the oncoming car screaming its horn and the mechanic so cool he even looks away to look at me beside him in the front seat, [...] My job, I say. I wish I'd quit my job. The scream goes by as the car swerves and the mechanic doesn't swerve to hit it' (*Fight Club* 144). Besides, in terms of charisma, the author upgrades the mechanic to the level of Tyler Durden. First by sounding like Tyler: 'The mechanic starts talking, and it's pure Tyler Durden' (*Fight Club* 149). The confusion of the narrator makes the reader wonder if the mechanic and Tyler are the same people. Furthermore, the mechanic can be as influential as Tyler is with the narrator. In the chapter of Raymond Hessel, the influence of the mechanic on the narrator is evident when he says: 'I'd done everything the mechanic said to do' (*Fight Club* 151). Nevertheless, the influence of Tyler is also present when the narrator follows orders: 'This is what Tyler wants me to do' (*Fight Club* 155). Additionally, the altercation with Raymond is quite similar to the collision of the car explained above. The narrator puts Raymond Hessel in a life-or-death situation by gun pointing him and asks what he wants to do in his life and when Raymond says that he wants to be a veterinarian, the narrator acts as rough as the mechanic or Tyler: 'You could be in school working your ass off, Raymond Hessel, or you could be dead. You choose.' (*Fight Club* 154). Therefore, influenced by his experience as a mechanic, Palahniuk gives particular importance to this character for the development of the narrator in the novel.

Moving on, the brawls while Palahniuk worked as a mechanic are not the only ones that contributed to the creation of the novel. 'The idea of Fight Club came to Palahniuk when he got into a fistfight on a weekend camping trip and then found, upon

returning to work, that people just pretended to ignore the awful contusions on his face' (Keesey 19). This experience can be interpreted in the book when the narrator goes to work with his bruised face: 'I'm going to work, and my punched-out eye sockets are two swollen-up black bagels [...] it really pissed me off that I'd become this totally centered Zen Master and nobody had noticed' (*Fight Club* 63). The narrator is upset because none of his co-workers will ask him what happened to his face because people panic when they have to socialize with each other for too long. That means people do not open up about their feelings which is an effect of what the consumerist society is about, feelings and physical contact do not matter; it is all about appearances and material things. Later on, the reader can perceive how the narrator is irritated because all he wants to do is to have social contact with someone, and nobody pays attention to him: 'Me, with my punched-out eyes and dried blood in big black crusty stains on my pants, I'm saying HELLO to everybody at work. HELLO! Look at me. HELLO! I am so ZEN. This is BLOOD. This is NOTHING.' (*Fight Club* 64).

The idea of support groups lies in Palahniuk's experience as a companion for people with serious diseases. 'Palahniuk himself, while volunteering as an escort for persons with cancer and AIDS, "confronted" his "fear of dying" and felt more deeply connected with others' (Keesey 16). Palahniuk sees that people facing death have purifying experiences in expressing how they feel differently. In the novel, it can be depicted in what the narrator thinks about support groups 'This is why I love support groups so much, if people thought you were dying, they gave you their full attention.' (*Fight Club* 107). This is connected with Palahniuk's experience. People in support groups believed that he was one of them and Palahniuk felt terrible for being the only one healthy among them (Keesey 16). As a consequence, the narrator lies all the time at support groups and the primary evidence that he does not have any serious illness is when

he goes to the doctor because of his insomnia: 'My doctor told me to chew valerian root and get more exercise. Eventually I'd fall asleep. [...] My doctor said, if I wanted to see real pain, I should go swing by First Eucharist on Tuesday night [...] See the cancer patients getting by.' (*Fight Club* 19).

Additionally, Palahniuk believes that part of the book's success belongs to the stories that people told him. These tales contributed to the creation of *Fight Club* and as Francisco Collado points out, the author thinks that people want to share their stories and his job as a writer is to be a listener before re-telling these stories in his books (195). Collado goes further and states 'One of the main devices he uses to gather information before writing a novel is joining different groups of people. In their meetings, he can experience what I interpret to be a face-to-face emotional encounter with the other' (194-195). Thus, these stories are portrayed in the book, for instance, as Tyler's menial jobs. As a projectionist, Tyler collects frames from porno movies and puts them in family movies: 'What else a projectionist shouldn't do: Tyler makes slides out of the best single frames from a movie. The first full frontal movie anyone can remember had the naked actress Angie Dickinson' (*Fight Club* 29) and afterwards: 'Movies had gone back to the distributor [...] Spliced with Tyler's single-frame flashes of pornography' (*Fight Club* 113). As a waiter, Tyler pees in the customers' food: 'I stop the elevator between floors while Tyler undoes his belt. [...] I say, hurry up, and I look back over my shoulder at Tyler with his half inch hanging in the soup' (*Fight Club* 79). So, Palahniuk uses these true stories to be part of the fiction in the novel: 'waiters who really litter their customers' food, projectionists who collect single frames from porno movies and cut them into G-rated films. Those things happen to be in *Fight Club* because the writer knew people who actually did them' (Collado 196).

2.2 Reception of the novel

Fight Club was published in 1996, but it was not widely known until its film version was released in 1999. Even though the essay focus on the novel, it is fair to give credit to the film because it launched the book to cult status, as Keesey states ‘the success of the 1999 *Fight Club* movie sent sales of Palahniuk’s novel skyrocketing’ (3). Some context is necessary to understand the impact of *Fight Club* in the people. In the nineties, consumer society is highly developed thanks to the dissatisfaction of the people, political apathy and an unsuccessful search for new morals that evolved into a moral emptiness filled with money and commodities as the new rules (Collado 193). Moreover, Collado points out that ‘contemporary US citizens could aspire to little more than a life saturated by drugs, the preoccupation for AIDS, the rule of fashion, the beautiful people, the cult of violence, reality shows, computer hacking, trash food, poverty, divorce, or existential boredom’ (193). So, there was a generation of people without a clear purpose, hopeless, raised with false expectations and repressed by ever-tightening social norms.

Among the population, those that feel strongly identified with *Fight Club* belong to the generation X. Naomi Mandel interprets the term as a generational appellation and a point of view where the ethos of radical freedom is achieved through the social networking paradigm of the web, such as Anonymous or Wikileaks (181). One of the reasons why the book has an impact on this generation is because ‘*Fight Club* underscores the technological revolution that Xers lived through in the 1980s and 1990s: the rise of home media, of digitalization and the personal computer’ (Mandel 192).

However, Palahniuk fulfils to bring out the concerns of this generation, portrayed in the narrator and Tyler Durden, as Mandel states:

For Generation Xers, heirs to the affirmative ethos of multiculturalism and the combative atmosphere of identity politics, identity often appears as unstable, insecure, and available to be marketed, co-opted, and commodified. Like the narrator, who is both himself and Tyler Durden, *Fight Club* is multiple and various (181).

Palahniuk knows what it feels to be stuck in a menial job where anger keeps growing up. So, the author's knowledge is a crucial factor in the book's linkage with the readers because he has 'been there, done that', as Keesey believes:

He connects with working-class people, many of them young, who do not usually read fiction. His writing features characters, situations, and language with which they can identify. Because it speaks to them and expresses some of the things they would say about their lives if they could, they become his avid fans, with some of them finding value in reading for the very first time (3).

People take at face value the basics of the novel and 'Impromptu fight clubs sprang up around the country and the rules of fight club became a pervasive cultural meme, adopted and adapted everywhere' (Keesey 3). So, the novel had a significant impact on society and categorised Palahniuk as a cult writer.

Some critics give hints to follow the book and explain their impressions of why the reader can feel identified with it. At first, what hooks the readers are the themes of 'the body and its disruption through (physical or metaphorical) violence destabilize socially drawn boundaries, putting the audience's fear, disgust, and pain in the service of the narrator's ideology' (Caracciolo 91). Because nobody talked about it, Palahniuk was a pioneer in that sense. Furthermore, narrator's issues such as consumerism, psychic order, emotional coldness or male identity crisis among others are shared by the readers, which leads to an empathetic engagement with the narrator and as a consequence, the book has an impact on the reader's everyday attitudes (Caracciolo 92). In a sense, as Collado suggests, 'the disappointment and resentment of the social losers that he describes in his fiction have brought [his fans] together in life' (196).

Palahniuk catches the reader's attention by expressing the primary feelings of a generation in *Fight Club*.

Next, most of the readers are unaware of the narrator's psychological disorders, that is why a reread of *Fight Club* is necessary because it can change the perspective of the reader: 'the revelation that Tyler Durden exists only in the narrator's imagination prompts spectators to revisit (and drastically alter) their interpretation of the whole story' (Caracciolo 80). The narrator discovers that Tyler is his alter ego when he explains to the protagonist how the change of personality works: 'We're not two separate men. Long story short, when you're awake, you have the control, and you can call yourself anything you want, but the second you fall sleep, I take over, and you become Tyler Durden' (*Fight Club* 167). So, most of the fans overlook this narrator's characteristic, take the story to the letter, and as a consequence, a lot of fight clubs appeared worldwide and there was a misunderstanding of the novel as Caracciolo states, 'once the audience discovers that Tyler Durden is the narrator's second personality, casting into doubt this fictional fact would be misinterpreting Palahniuk's novel' (81).

Tyler Durden. He becomes the fan's favourite because, in a way, he is the voice of the voiceless of a specific group of people, as Jesse Kavadlo states 'And what makes Durden attractive to the narrator-his potency, wit, and sly subversion- are the same qualities that appeal to a readership of solitary young men' (9). Moreover, Tyler represents all the bad feelings that consumerist society creates on people that do not fit in it and portray their frustration and will to rebel. That is why the reader feels powerfully identified with Durden because he is alienated angry, socially and economically helpless (Kavadlo 12). Understandably, readers can feel related to Tyler as well as the unawareness of his identity, that is, a hallucination, a second personality.

So Kavadlo advises ‘we must never take Tyler literally; to do so would be madness’ (10). However, as it has been said previously, readers can feel strongly identified with Tyler and forget about his origin. Because, here it seems like Tyler is talking in the name of the fans by giving a powerful speech to the commissioner, who represents the status quo:

‘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 you dinner. [...] We control every part of your life. We are the middle children of history, raised by television to believe that someday we’ll be millionaires and movie stars and rocks stars, but we won’t. And we’re just learning this fact. [...] So don’t fuck with us” (Palahniuk 166).

Tyler becomes an icon in the eyes of the readers. He encourages their potential as well as he invalidates the idea of revolution. As Peter Mathews states ‘Posing as a champion of the lower classes, Tyler Durden is able to draw on the energy and imperative power of the heterogeneous while simultaneously negating its potential revolution’ (91). Nevertheless, it is not only his words what hooks the reader but his rebellious actions against consumerism too. Mathews expands on ‘His revolutionary actions have a subversive attraction to them: selling soap made from liposuction fat to rich women; pissing in perfume bottles that supposedly contain ambergris; splicing frames of pornography into children’s films’ (97-98). So, these actions also connect with the fans because they would like to vent their frustrations with the type of actions in real life.

Some critics take *Fight Club* at face value and criticize the role of Tyler supporting manliness and terrorism. But they do not take into account that there is an unreliable narrator. Robert Bennet explains it:

critics have criticized *Fight Club* as if it simply and unproblematically advocated a return to the primordial masculinity and terrorist violence promoted by Palahniuk's anarchistic character, Tyler Durden. It is as if critics have forgotten both that *Fight Club* is narrated by a highly unreliable narrator—a radically alienated individual suffering from a wide range of psychological disorders (67).

In addition, physical contact in the novel is a release of the body stereotype in the consumerist society and an opportunity to feel something amongst the fake society. However, Giroux sees the use of violence in the bodies as a path for manliness unable to change the outside world, as he says:

The body is no longer the privileged space of social citizenship or political agency [...] What changes in *Fight Club* is the context enabling men to assault each other, but the outside world remains the same, unaffected by the celebration of hyper-masculinity and violence that provides the only basis for solidarity (15).

However, Olivia Burgess disagrees with this point of view, as she thinks that exhausted bodies and hysterical language are opportunities for change (268). Furthermore, a community structured on the body can be an opportunity toward awareness, and *Fight Club* brings out that opportunity as an alternative to oppression with the establishment of a revolutionary utopia where bodies are liberated through violence and pain (Burgess 268).

Finally, Giroux denounces that all the depictions of violence, masculinity and gender at *Fight Club* lead to the support of proto-fascist ideologies (17). Such an example is Project Mayhem, which has a detail that fills the fascist theory. The space monkeys wear black shirts, as it says 'In addition, the applicant has to arrive with the following: Two black shirts' (*Fight Club* 127). It might be related to the Italian fascist Mussolini and his army the Blackshirts. That is one of the reasons that can lead to misinterpreting the purpose of Project Mayhem. On the one hand, Kavaddo empathizes

with Giroux's view: 'Giroux's reading is understandable. *Fight Club* dares its readers to take Tyler- and his reactionary politics- at face value' (11). On the other hand, Kavadlo believes that Giroux substitutes what *Fight Club* depicts for what they ultimately prescribe because even though *Fight Club* opposes consumerist conformity, Project Mayhem absorbs its members' individuality more than consumerism (11). Once Big Bob is killed, the narrator realizes that space monkeys believe he is Tyler Durden, so he stops believing in the dogma of Project Mayhem: 'only in death will we have our own names since only in death are we no longer part of the effort. In death we become heroes' (*Fight Club* 178). The actions of the narrator to stop Project Mayhem and his nonbelieving dogma is enough for Kavadlo to believe that 'Palahniuk's irony thus subverts Giroux's reading-the book's endorsement of violence, rather than the narrator, self-destructs' (11). Moreover, Palahniuk mocks fascism because the bombs fail to detonate: 'And nothing. Nothing explodes. The barrel of the gun tucked in my surviving cheek, I say, Tyler, you mixed the nitro with paraffin, didn't you.' (*Fight Club* 205). Therefore, Palahniuk condemns rather than praises fascism, as Andrew Hock Soon Ng argues that Tyler's revolutionary project fails because it is a criticism of an obsolete ideology that keeps growing nowadays (133). But Giroux indeed focuses on the movie, and one big difference with the novel is that the bombs do explode, so his point of view denouncing the support of fascist militia and terrorist attacks is comprehensible, even though 'If *Fight Club* embodies Giroux's "protofascism", it is in order to condemn' (Kavadlo 13).

In a sense, even though some critics interpret the novel with a more in-depth analysis and give hints to follow the reading, its reception is shocking. Because most readers, as well some critics, understood it at face value. *Fight Club* does not leave anybody

indifferent, whether people praise or despise it. And that is because Palahniuk uses a specific style that will be analyzed in the next section.

2.3 Literary trend and style in the book

Sometimes, Palahniuk's style is labelled as that of a nihilist that stands for destruction in order to be free. It is because readers may take his works at face value. It is quite the opposite because Palahniuk uses an ironic style to criticise the main issues in the nineties such as consumerism, extreme violence or manliness. Keesey believes that the characterisation of Palahniuk as a pessimist nihilist prevents people from seeing that he is a satirist with specific targets for opprobrium (9). Besides, thanks to Palahniuk's use of irony there is a double effect as Kavadlo argues: 'Palahniuk's moral fiction conveys, but ultimately warns against, both' (10). So, the narrator and his mental problems or Project Mayhem and his ideology should not be taken at face value. For instance, it seems that Palahniuk embraces the idea about the emasculation of men that need to feel powerful. That is why they follow Tyler and the doctrine of Project Mayhem afterwards, but the final plan is not successful because the bombs do not explode and these emasculated men are referred to as 'space monkeys' (*Fight Club* 164). It means that these angry white men that feel emasculated are following a guy who has schizophrenia. Therefore, Palahniuk is mocking them. As Kavadlo states 'this is the Palahniuk paradox: the novels persuasively embody and give voice to the disenfranchised Angry White Male only to critique him humorously, relentlessly, and morally, from inside the novel's close (14).

Palahniuk, aware of the confusion and misinterpretations that *Fight Club* can have on people, explains in his book *Stranger than Fiction* the basis of his works. 'If you haven't already noticed, all my books are about a lonely person looking for some way to connect with other people' (*Stranger Than Fiction* XV). The narrator of *Fight Club*

is a lonely guy that needs to feel accepted in a community or beloved by other people. That is why he ends blowing up his isolated apartment, goes to support groups to feel accepted and looks for company, which he eventually finds in Marla. She is the reason for his split personality because he likes Marla and the only way to connect with her is through Tyler Durden, his alter ego. Besides, Palahniuk writes because 'since you can't control life, at least you can control your version' (*Stranger Than Fiction* 205). So, Palahniuk believes that readers can learn to accept full responsibility for their lives because *Fight Club* takes the reader to extreme places in search of adventures and the knowledge that they might afford (Casado de Rocha 107).

However, Palahniuk is conscious that there is something wrong with moral values.

People have a hard time socialising with each other. Collado explains this thought: emotional communication has become a big problem in our contemporary post-industrial society because prosthetic devices and technology have helped to install the centralisation of commodities as the ultimate value in our contemporary society (194). Thus, Palahniuk exemplifies this with the narrator describing his furniture: 'We all have the same Johanneshow armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern. [...] The Alle cutlery service. Stainless steel. Dishwasher safe. The Vild hall clock made of galvanized steel, oh, I had to have that' (*Fight Club* 43). This problem with values that develops in a moral emptiness makes Palahniuk want to add ethical elements in his works. But *Fight Club*, as well as the rest of Palahniuk's fiction, is associated with the literary trend called blank fiction, even though Palahniuk 'goes a step forward and enters an emotional quest for the other' (Collado 194-195). Another literary style the author uses is minimalism. Both blank fiction and minimalism shall be explained next, but what is crystal clear is that for Palahniuk, literature serves to connect emotionally

with the reader as he uses minimalist and blank techniques to find ethical values (Collado 197).

2.3.1 Blank Fiction

James Annesley, in his volume *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel*, explains this literary trend as a representation of an exhausted life characterized by an ‘emphasis on the extreme, the marginal and the violent’, that goes hand in hand with a ‘sense of indifference and indolence’ (1998:1). Moreover, Palahniuk portrays a conservative white society from the last two decades of the twentieth century which is obsessed with sexual excess, consumerism, or violence among other things (Collado 191). Palahniuk considers himself a follower of transgressive writing, fiction in which characters misbehave and commit crimes or pranks as a way of feeling alive. For instance, space monkeys follow orders from Tyler to do a prank on the Hein tower: ‘sets fires so the window at the center of each huge eye blazed huge and alive and inescapable over the city at dawn [...] the face is an angry pumpkin’ (*Fight Club* 118).

One of Palahniuk’s technique is going on the body which Keesey explains: ‘involves conveying a character’s experience by describing it in very physical terms so that the reader can feel what the character feels and thus form an even closer identification with him or her’ (6). So, all of his fiction involves sex, violence or illness, among other things because it creates a sympathetic connection with the reader. An example in the book is when the narrator talks about sex: ‘After Tyler and Marla had sex about ten times, [...] How could Tyler not fall for that’ (*Fight Club* 59-60). At first, the reader can empathise with the narrator. He believes what the narrator believes, that Marla is having sex with another person, which angers the narrator because he wants to do it with her. Thus, the reader can feel sorry for the narrator because he can feel his

frustration, even though afterwards, the reader discovers that the narrator was Tyler all along.

Another aspect that Palahniuk is interested in is horror fiction. As Keesey points out, the author borrows elements from this genre like haunted houses, grotesque bodies and gruesome deaths (12). Palahniuk describes Tyler's house through the narrator in a mysterious way, which keeps the creepy effect of the horror genre: 'The house that Tyler rents, it has three stories and a basement. We carry around candles. [...] The rain trickles down through the house, and everything wooden swells and shrinks' (*Fight Club* 57). Next, as a way to mock social norms, Palahniuk uses grotesque bodies (Keesey 13). In the book, it is depicted in the beaten face of the narrator at work: 'My boss doesn't know the material, but he won't let me run the demo with a black eye and half my face swollen from the stitches inside my cheek. The stitches have come loose, and I can feel them with my tongue against the inside of my cheek' (*Fight Club* 47). In the section of gruesome deaths, the reader can misunderstand what happens with Marla's mother. At face value, it seems Tyler kills Marla's mother by boiling her: 'The truth. We made soap out of it. Her. Marla's mother. [...] Marla screaming, "You boiled my mother!" Tyler boiled her mother' (*Fight Club* 93). But it is just a way of speaking because Tyler only uses her fat to make soap, that is why Tyler sends chocolate to the mother; so, they can take more fat out of her: 'For no apparent reason, Tyler sent Marla's mother a fifteen-pound box of chocolates' (*Fight Club* 89). Even though it is not a gruesome death, the reader can feel disgusted with this chapter after knowing this. Besides, this feeling is reinforced when Marla labels the protagonists as cannibals: 'Marla came to the house and threatened to call the police and have me arrested for cooking her mother [...] screaming that I was a ghoul and a cannibal' (*Fight Club* 88). Or when Tyler tells the narrator what if he would have eaten the

mother's fat accidentally: "Things would've been worse" Tyler says, "If you'd accidentally eaten what was in one of those sandwich bags" (*Fight Club* 90).

Finally, the characters have an epiphany at some point. As Collado points out 'they reach an earthly hell from which they revert by means of an ethical impulse characterized by an explosion of feeling for the other' (194). It is portrayed in Bob's death, the narrator realises that Tyler has gone too far and has a feeling of sadness for Bob, so he tries to do the right thing and tries to stop all the projects: 'I go to fight club tonight to shut it down. [...] A man is dead, I say. This game is over. It's not for fun anymore' (*Fight Club* 178).

2.3.2 Minimalism

His fiction also follows the tenets of minimalism. Palahniuk explains this style as 'writing without passing judgment. Nothing is fed to the reader as 'fat' or 'happy'. You can only describe actions and appearances in a way that makes a judgement in the reader's mind' (*Stranger Than Fiction* 144). Such is the case of the novel's ending, which does not solve the split personality of the narrator. Because it is not clear whether he embraces or despises his alter ego. An example is how the narrator confuses heaven with the mental hospital, and God with a doctor: 'People write to me in heaven and tell me I'm remembered [...] I look at God behind his desk, taking notes on a pad, but God's got this all wrong' (*Fight Club* 207). This confusion is part of what Palahniuk wants to do, that is, create an opinion on the reader about what happens at the end, because as Mathews points out, he leaves the book enticingly open-ended (101-102). Moreover, he adds 'By refusing to come down on either side, Palahniuk satirizes the boundaries of left and right, self and other, friend and enemy' (102).

Ernest Hemingway is a significant influence on Palahniuk. He uses his style of minimalism, showing the readers only the tip of the iceberg. For instance, every time the narrator says that he is a human organ, that is the tip. Nevertheless, a more in-depth analysis shows that every time he is frustrated or angry, instead of showing these feelings, the narrator chooses to say: 'I am totally Joes Gallbladder' (*Fight Club* 58). This example relates to the first time Tyler and Marla have sex, and the narrator is furious because he likes Marla.

Palahniuk uses repetition of key phrases, which are part of the themes known in minimalism as horses because they carry the reader from the start to the end of the story. Such an example can be the repetition of the first rule: 'The first rule about fight club is you don't talk about fight club' (*Fight Club* 48).

However, his primary device is the narrator. The use of the second person throughout the novel brings the reader closer to the events: 'You don't understand any of it, and then you just die' (*Fight Club* 12). Besides, it is a 'breakdown between the narrator and Tyler, and by extension, character and reader, around which the novel revolves' (Kavadlo 11). Furthermore, Palahniuk complicates things even more with a technique that Collado points out 'his recurrent use of narrators who start telling a story in medias res before looking back in retrospect to the events that brought them to their present plight' (196). For instance, the beginning of the novel depicts Tyler pushing a gun in the mouth of the narrator: 'Tyler's pushing a gun in my mouth and saying, the first step to eternal life is you have to die' (*Fight Club* 11). Apart from that, what tricks the reader, even more, is how Palahniuk uses unreliability on the narrator, as he uses the technique of mind tricking. As Carracciolo explains, it is a representation of the hallucinations of the narrator as if it were part of the reality, and suddenly revealed

that it was only part of the narrator's mind, not real (80). Thus, the reader does not know what the narrator truly thinks, so they only see the tip of the iceberg.

3. Conclusion

This work has tried to provide an analysis of Chuck Palahniuk and his style through *Fight Club* so the reader can have a better understanding and another point of view of the novel. His personal experiences portrayed in the book have been explained and exemplified because it is an advantage if the reader knows more about the author before he or she reads one of his works. That is, the more readers know about an author, the more they can understand the novel. Besides, most of these experiences contributed to the development of the novel, so it was essential to explain them because, in some passages of the novel, the reader may not understand why the author gives importance to specific subjects. For instance, the readers will have a better understanding of the narrator's fake feelings at support groups if they know the author's voluntary work is escorting people with terminal diseases, and the misunderstanding that happened because these people believed Palahniuk had a disease, too. So, his feeling of guilt is portrayed in the novel as a faker in support groups.

Next, the reception of the novel has been added to this paper because it does not leave anyone indifferent. Apart from the film's success, the novel is a best seller because readers feel related when they read *Fight Club*. Palahniuk perfectly depicts the feelings of a generation affected by technological revolutions and the consumerist society, among other things. Besides, the main aspects in the novel that readers can feel identified with have been explained and exemplified, such as the frustration of the narrator, the menial jobs or Tyler Durden, among others. However, most readers take

the novel at face value, and they forget about the mental disorders of the protagonist.

All of a sudden, *Fight Club* is categorised as a cult book. A kind of new religion.

Because of this, it is necessary to put in the paper more critical in-depth analyses of the book to be helpful for future readers. Furthermore, luckily, they will not take Tyler Durden or Project Mayhem seriously, even though some critics and many readers took the novel at face value and condemned it. That is the power of Palahniuk's writing, he can create different points of view regarding *Fight Club*, and this section has tried to explain a more in-depth analysis of it.

Lastly, Palahniuk's style in the novel has been explained and exemplified through Blank fiction and Minimalism to help the reader understand *Fight Club*. Using Blank fiction, the author tends to create strong reactions in the reader, whether it is the extreme violence in the fights or savage sex between Tyler and Marla, among other things. Palahniuk's main aim is to make the reader an active one, not a passive one, and he uses Minimalism to do so. Techniques such as *in medias res* starting at the beginning of the story or mind tricking with the fictional world of the schizophrenic narrator demand an active reading as well as a rereading of the novel because Palahniuk only shows the tip of the iceberg. Therefore, once the reader has reread the novel, he will realise that *Fight Club* is about a lonely guy with mental problems who wants to connect with other people, just as Palahniuk explains in *Stranger Than Fiction*. Thus, there would have not been Tyler Durden, fight clubs or Project Mayhems if the narrator had expressed to Marla his feelings for her. Hence, Palahniuk's main message regarding ethical values is, as the song's chorus goes, 'All you need is love'.

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