

**TRANSGRESSION AS REPRESENTED IN CHUCK  
PALAHNIUK'S *FIGHT CLUB***

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## THE ABSTRACT

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Tiivistelmä - Abstract  <p>Tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää, kuinka <i>Fight Club</i> romaanissa käsitellään transgressiivistä kaunokirjallisuutta. Tutkimuksessa hyödynnetään metodina lähilukutekniikkaa, jossa aineisto analysoidaan keskittyen transgressiivisiin teemoihin sekä narratiivisiin rakenteisiin. Tutkimuskysymyksenä on se, miten transgressiivisuus nousee esille Chuck Palahniukin <i>Fight Club</i> -romaanin kirjoitustyyliin.</p> <p>Analyysini jakautuu kolmeen osaan. Ensimmäisenä tarkastelen transgressiivisuutta <i>Fight Clubin</i> narratiivisissa rakenteissa. Tutkimuksessa käy ilmi, että transgressiivisuuden vaikutusta narratiivissa voidaan tarkastella tajunnanvirran, epäluotettavan kertojan ja epälineaarisuuden kautta, joihin vaikuttaa päähenkilön syvenevä mielisairaus. Analyysin toisessa ja kolmannessa vaiheessa tarkastelen romaanin transgressiivisiä teemoja ja kielenkäyttöä. Tutkimukseni osoitti, että transgressiivisuudella on romaanissa monta merkitystä, kuten nykyaikaisen konsumerismin ahdistavan vaikutuksen ja eksistentiaalismin kuvaaminen.</p>	
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

*No man is an island entire of itself; every man  
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;  
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe  
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as  
well as any manner of thy friends or of thine  
own were; any man's death diminishes me,  
because I am involved in mankind.*

-John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624)

In the present study I will be analysing a genre of fiction that was relatively unknown to me until recently. Even with a heavy literary direction of my BA studies, the term “transgressive fiction” never seemed to arise in any of the literature classes at the time. It was only after long admiration of Palahniuk’s works that this “new and mysterious” phenomenon caught my interest, though there is nothing new about it at all. Quite soon I realized that I have read and enjoyed many works of fiction that would be considered “transgressive literature”, works from James Joyce to Charles Bukowski, works seemingly very different yet share a common thread when the subject matter is analysed with depth. Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (1997) in particular has intrigued me among other transgressive fiction works, which created a possibility of dedicating this study to the novel that raised me from a young teenager to an adult, yet still offering new and interesting ways in which the language and themes in the book can be interpreted, even after twenty years has passed from its initial release.

*Fight Club* is a story of a man who is struggling with insomnia and finds a friend in someone named Tyler Durden. Their friendship leads to increasingly destructive behaviour – from the creation of a fight club to

Project Mayhem, where the fighters turned into Tyler Durden's "acolytes" who carry out random acts of mischief and crime. Towards the end of the novel, it is revealed that Tyler Durden is the narrator himself. In his attempts to "overthrow" Tyler, the narrator is institutionalised as Project Mayhem members wait for his return as Tyler Durden.

In his fiction, Palahniuk raises complex social issues that are relevant today as much as they were 20 years ago when *Fight Club* was first published, but he does not resolve or answer any of the political or social questions the book may raise. *Fight Club* ends, in a way, unresolved, with the greater part of the "purpose" of the novel relying on the reader's interpretation. As a winner of the Oregon Book Rewards for best novel and the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award in 1997, some praised *Fight Club* for the brilliant writing and social criticism, and according to Palahniuk himself, some criticized the novel's portrayal of aggression and hostility: "Other reviewers hated it. Oh, they called it "too dark". "Too violent." "Too strident and shrill and dogmatic"" (FC<sup>1</sup>: 217). As I will be discussing in the current thesis, scathing critical reviews are not uncommon when looking at transgressive fiction. Due to the release of a film based on the novel, *Fight Club's* transgressive themes have sparked a lot of debate and controversy in mainstream media.

The life cycle of Palahniuk's *Fight Club* has been full of successes and setbacks. The reception of both the novel and film adaptation of *Fight Club* was polarised, some critics thought it to be a "Swiftian attack on our consumerist, designer-label-worshipping society" (Taubin 1999: 16), some criticised *Fight Club* for glorifying the hyper-masculine "warrior culture" (Giroux 2001: 17). It is clear that regardless of the nature of the emotions *Fight Club* stirs within people, it has "struck a raw nerve within contemporary culture" (Maslin 1999: 14), inciting a strong emotional reaction

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviation for *Fight Club*.

in the readers. The controversial aspects of the novel are irrefutably tied to the transgression elements, which is common in transgressive literature, as the controversial parts of a story are often the most popular and discussed among the critics and readers. As a result, *Fight Club*, both the novel and the film adaptation, remains the topic of heated discussion in foreign transgressive writing discourse regarding literature and social issues, and how literature portrays or contributes to these issues.

Aside from the aforementioned polarising reviews upon the release of the novel, Palahniuk has also revealed the difficulty of publishing transgressive novels after the turn of the millennium – the aftermath of the terror attack that toppled the twin towers in New York on 11<sup>th</sup> of September, 2001 highly affected the transgressive fiction scene. The ending of the film adaptation of *Fight Club*, which was released merely a couple years prior to the terrifying event, shows explosions going off in skyscrapers that slowly sink into the ground in a grand final moment. In an interview with Kavanagh (2009: 179), Palahniuk expressed his doubts about a novel like *Fight Club* being published in a post-9/11 world:

In the days after September 11, 2001, my editor told me that several book projects had just died on his desk. These were all “transgressional” fiction, like *Fight Club* or *American Psycho*, where characters act out in order to gain a sense of personal power. According to my editor, Random House didn’t feel the market would support these stories in the near future. Again, because no one could expect an audience to see humor or insight in any form of civil disobedience or consensual violence...It’s hard not to expect writers to muzzle their characters or very clearly depict “socially responsible” consequences for the events in their books.

Though the novel itself was published over two decades ago, the transgression in *Fight Club* has interested scholars even to this day. Despite the fact that transgressive fiction writers have faced criticism and rejection from publishers in recent time, the study of transgression in literature is gaining popularity. As the discourse regarding transgression in literature has

become more and more popular over time, it considerably easier to discover varied approaches to analysing the genre. In David McCracken's (2016: 2) study of irony in Palahniuk's fiction, he stated that in many ways, transgressive writing has become the next major wave in American literary studies, as there are an increasing number of papers on this particular topic in various literature and popular culture conferences nowadays.

What made me choose *Fight Club* and the genre in general as the focus of my MA thesis is that no matter how extreme the subject matter, it portrays humanity in its raw, unadulterated form. According to Ihab Hassan (1980: 200), the popularity of the postmodern novel owes itself to the fact that it is "... essentially subversive in form and anarchic in its cultural spirit. It dramatizes its lack of faith in art even as it produces new works of art intended to hasten both cultural and artistic dissolution." As such, readers can often relate to or empathise with a rebellious narrative or a pained protagonist, as the most resonating stories often force a certain degree of self-reflection.

Additionally, the transgression in *Fight Club* has given rise to various interpretations by different scholars, showing the diversity of ways it can be analysed. I have also included and discussed a great deal of this research in the current study. Whether we consider *Fight Club* as a story of violence, anarchy, love or just a fever dream of a man with a slowly declining mental health, it is hard to deny the novel's emotional impact, be it negative or positive.

Some of the highly discussed themes regarding *Fight Club* include gender roles and consumerism. These will also constitute a part of the current study; nevertheless, the main aim of this study is a larger examination of the phenomenon of transgression in *Fight Club*. Therefore, it will involve not only the discussion of its themes, but also of its language and narrative. This

study will discuss the views of many notable scholars that have analysed transgressive literature, specifically the works of Chuck Palahniuk. One of my own inspirations behind the in-depth analysis of *Fight Club* is the article by Bennett (2005: 65) discussing existentialist literature and the cultural logic in *Fight Club*:

While *Fight Club*'s supporters and detractors have both made insightful comments about the text, most critical commentary has relied on narrow and reductive critical assumptions that limit, rather than encourage, a more complete exploration of the text's complexity. Not only have critics focused almost exclusively on issues of gender and class identity, instead of engaging Palahniuk's much broader—and I will argue essentially existentialist—exploration of social alienation and the human condition, but they have also persisted in reading *Fight Club* as a relatively straightforward text instead of analyzing its more complex aesthetic strategies.

While it is tempting to take the political and social implications of *Fight Club* at face value, Bennett suggests that, no matter the theme that is being analysed, a study on *Fight Club* can benefit greatly from a deeper analysis into transgression and its purpose, rather than single thematic approach that may lead to a very one-sided result. Thus, the goal of this study is an in-depth analysis of *Fight Club* from the angle of transgression as it is a significant part of the novel, covering transgression in themes, use of language and as a narrative device to further the story.

As stated above, the ways in which transgression in fiction could be analysed are plentiful. In this study, among these varied possibilities, my particular focus will be: what does transgression achieve in terms of the narrative in the novel?

In addition, I will be looking at how the writing style of Palahniuk contributes to the portrayal of transgression in the novel. This particular aspect is not as widely discussed as the social criticism in *Fight Club* (e.g.



gender roles or the detrimental effect of the age of consumerism on Man), but I find it to be equally important to discuss the use of language when analysing the role of transgression in the narrative. Transgression in *Fight Club* is largely expressed through the narrator's mental illness which gets progressively worse over time, meaning that the language or the particular sentence structures Palahniuk has decided to employ may reflect the narrator's illness, as transgression can be expressed through the use of language, considering that the narrator's mental illness will also affect how he interacts with the people around him. Therefore, I believe it is important to analyse the novel from a linguistic standpoint as well as the narrative of *Fight Club* to thoroughly exhaust the possible approaches in which transgression could be researched in the novel.

Aside from the narrative and language, I will also be looking at the themes of the novel and what kind of a role transgression plays in those particular themes. As suggested above, the research regarding transgression and Palahniuk's work often revolves around the thematic aspect of the work, however, analysing themes in addition to looking at transgression as a narrative device alongside with the particularities of the language used in the novel can contribute much to the research as a whole. Thus, I hope to offer a fresh approach in analysing transgression, supported by the important previous works of scholars in individual topics and presented in a clear and concise manner.

The current study is organised so that prior knowledge of *Fight Club* and transgressive research is not required. After the current introductory chapter, I will present and discuss the academic discourse regarding not only *Fight Club*, but transgressive fiction as a whole in chapter 2. Chapter 3 discusses the important terminology regarding transgressive writing. The common knowledge of the plot of *Fight Club* comes from the film adaptation of the novel. However, the novel includes some key differences from the film

adaptation; thus, chapter 4 includes an overview of the story of the novel in order to avoid any possible confusion. Chapters 5-7 are dedicated to harnessing all the theoretical background of transgression in order to analyse *Fight Club*. This is the most important part of the study, as it will include the analysis of transgression in the themes, narrative devices and language of the novel, respectively. Lastly, chapter 8 is the conclusive chapter where the final discussion of the findings of this study will take place.

## 2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON TRANSGRESSION AND *FIGHT CLUB*

Up until now, no research on the transgression in Chuck Palahniuk's work has been conducted in Finland. It is worth noting, however, that prior analyses on transgressive fiction and the works of Palahniuk are abundant abroad, and these studies will be used as basis for analysing *Fight Club* and its transgressive elements.

The analysis of *Fight Club's* transgression is divided roughly into three: the analysis of themes, narrative and language. As such, the theory relies on a variety of authors and their research regarding each of these three aspects. Firstly, the previous research on the themes of *Fight Club* is plentiful in the transgressive fiction discourse. Secondly, transgression in a narrative is less popular regarding *Fight Club*, but overall a highly discussed topic regarding transgressive fiction, and lastly, there is little research about transgression in language specifically, which will require a broader approach from a linguistic standpoint.

The discussion of the themes present in *Fight Club* is on-going and the selected ones highlighted in the current study reflect the most discussed themes regarding *Fight Club*. Analysing the aspect of gender in *Fight Club* will draw upon the research of Alex Tuss (2004), Andrew Hock Soon Ng (2005) and Kennett (2005), who offer various ideas on why masculinity is expressed through (self-)destruction in the novel. The discussion of theme of the consumerism will rely on mainly Foucault's theories of society acting as a "carceral prison" for Man. Additionally, this rebellion against consumerism will be linked to cultism – Tyler Durden's defiance against the

status quo will pave way for the creation of his “small army” of “space monkeys”.

One of the most significant scholars to research Palahniuk’s portrayal of transgression is Sartain (2005), who offers a multitude of ways in which transgressive themes could be interpreted. Foucault’s (1977, 1979) ideas regarding transgression and the modern society offer an interesting angle to a) interpret the meaning of transgression and b) analyse the theme of consumerism in the novel. Vartan (2005)’s thesis on the transgression in *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis and *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis reflects on how transgressive works of fiction are handled by the media and critics.

Regarding the narrative analysis of transgression, Humphrey’s (1954) ideas regarding stream-of-consciousness will offer valuable insights into the way of defining stream-of-consciousness and the common misconceptions. Marie-Anne Visoi’s (2014) work on transgression is useful in dissecting *Fight Club* from the standpoint of narrative theory, as her work analyses the cultural and literary tradition of transgressive texts. Particularly, Visoi’s work is helpful in determining the significance of the unreliable narrator narrative device.

Transgression and time will be discussed on the basis of Cambel’s (1993) scientific definitions of chaos theory and Sartain’s (2005) analysis of nonlinearity issues and chaos theory present in *Fight Club*.

As mentioned earlier, the previous work on linguistic analysis of transgression and *Fight Club* remains scarce. The current study aims to capitalise on this scarcity and offer an approach that combines the thematic, narrative and the linguistic study of transgression in the novel. As such, the linguistic analysis chapter relies less on previous studies related to transgression and more on the general research of both repetition and

minimalism. In order to analyse Palahniuk's minimalist style, I will mainly be using the work of Boeckx (2006) as a basis of minimalist theory for the analysis of *Fight Club*. Regarding repetition, Aitchison (1994) offers a concise framework for the analysis of repetition in writing, which will be used to study how repetition is used in *Fight Club* and what are the meanings it creates as a part of a transgressive work of fiction.

## 3 CONCEPTS AND APPROACH

### 3.1 Defining Transgressive Fiction

For the purpose of analysing the notion of “transgression”, I will define the term by drawing on insights provided by several scholars. Leaving the literature aspect aside, Foust (2010: 3) describes transgression as “indiscretions that incur various reactions from the mildly normative (glares or sighs of disapproval from passers-by), to the brutally disciplining (facing violent arrest or fiery retribution from locals). Transgressive actions incite reactions due to their relationship to norms.” Foust’s definition does not describe the meaning of transgression as much as it describes the common reaction to an act that is considered transgressive. This notion applies to literature in a similar manner, as transgressive elements of a story may often incite strong emotions in the reader. Vartan (2005: 66) describes transgression as “first and foremost a disobedient, even rebellious, offspring of art, one that specifically aims to displace and destroy authority, to break taboos and to subvert established norms and conventions, an act that is typically perceived to be shocking and/or even disturbing.” This is the reason why transgressive literature often features themes that can be disturbing for the readers, as taboo topics can often stir controversy when released into mainstream media.

As an example, the theme of violence, especially sexual violence in transgressive novels may upset readers due to the sensitive nature of the topic. *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis is a great example of the controversy transgressive novels can create upon release: “Reviews deplored its extremely graphic content which jovially and dispassionately offered up

scenes of sex, mutilation, and murder to punctuate the toneless blather of the Yuppie lifestyle. Various groups and individuals campaigned for a national boycott of the novel because of the acts of pornographic violence it portrays, while in other countries authorities attempted to ban *American Psycho*.” (Vartan 2005: 145) Despite the boycotts and age restrictions set on the novel upon release, *American Psycho*, like *Fight Club*, received a film adaptation with moderate box office success on release. At the same time, it is widely considered a cult classic.

Michel Foucault (1977: 35), a philosopher and a cultural theorist, was among the first to theorise transgression in his essay titled “A Preface to Transgression”. Foucault proposes that the core aspects of the phenomenon include the following:

Transgression does not seek to oppose one thing to another, nor does it achieve its purpose through mockery or by upsetting the solidity of foundations;[...] Transgression is neither violence in a divided world (in an ethical world) nor a victory over limits (in a dialectical or revolutionary world); and exactly for this reason, its role is to measure the excessive distance that it opens at the heart of the limit and to trace the flashing line that causes the limit to arise.

In this context, *limit* or a *limit-experience* is a notion typically associated with writers such as Michel Foucault or Georges Bataille, and it describes an intense, seemingly impossible action or experience, e.g. madness or suffering, which tests reality as we know it or perceive it. Foucault’s rather poetic description of transgression insinuates that transgression does not aim to upset or disturb, it merely exists as a reflection of the reality that we live in. Foucault describes the essence of transgression as “crossing”, whether it is crossing a moral line or defying the law. Foucault (1977 : 35) suggests that, in order to begin analysing transgression, it “must be liberated from the scandalous and the subversive”, meaning that the shock that transgression might precipitate will hinder attempts to understand it. This is particularly important to note regarding criticism of transgressive fiction. As mentioned

earlier, *Fight Club* and other works that are transgressive in nature will benefit greatly from an analysis that attempts to find the deeper meaning in the thematic aspects of the novel, as the upsetting and shocking parts of the novel may act as distractions. For example, it may be easy to categorise *Fight Club* as a novel that perpetuates overly masculine stereotypes and violent behaviour, thus concluding the analysis. In such a case, evaluating the actions of the narrator/Tyler Durden as individuals (as “two sides of the same coin”) rather than men would become difficult. However, it is this kind of an angle that allows for the greatest depths in analysis, as the protagonist’s actions would be fuelled by his values, emotions and memories, rather than acting as a stereotype for the male gender as a whole. As such, Foucault’s idea of removing transgression from the subversive remains important even nowadays for analysing transgressive works of fiction.

According to Anthony Julius (2003: 17-18), the word “transgression” can be traced to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the term denoted an act of defiance against God:

The word was soon secularized to describe disobedience of the law. It was then enlarged, first to include the violating of any rule or principle and then to embrace any departure from correct behaviour ... And in this broadening of meaning, expanding from questions of theology to those of mere good manners, by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century ‘transgressions’ came to include digressions: deviations from the rule of one’s discourse. ... Parallel to this expansion lie two additional developments in meaning. ‘to transgress’ acquires in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (though then later loses) a transitive sense: the transgressor ‘transgresses against’ a person, offending in some very serious manner. ‘Transgression’ here detaches itself from rule-breaking and becomes instead a kind of assault, although not necessarily a physical one – an insult perhaps, or a provocation. It is not the rule that is violated but the person. It acquires this meaning: an act of aggression that causes injury. This act of aggression can also be against a discourse or a style: disrupting it with low, excluded material (a shout, the breaking of wind, a belch, a profane interjection) or by exposing its internal contradictions (drawing out inherent antinomies, introducing exception, identifying impurities)



...‘Transgression’ is also used to refer to any exceeding of boundaries. This is closest to its etymological sense: to trans-gress, pass beyond, go over. This relates the word to ‘trespass’ – the illicit crossing of a boundary. To subvert a hierarchy, placing the subordinate above the elevated, or to mix distinct concepts or substances, upsetting demarcations that have some institutional or tacit sanction, could be transgressive in this sense.

Julius’ historical account on the meaning of transgression overlaps with Foucault’s idea of transgression as the “crossing of a limit” as exceeding boundaries, as well as Foust’s idea of transgression as an act of aggression or a deliberate provocation. Nowadays, transgression is defined in a broader manner, involving an act of defiance or rebellion against the societal norms. Aside from the historical meaning of transgression, Julius’ description of transgression as a disruption or aggression against a discourse or style is relevant when analysing *Fight Club*.

The roots of transgressive literature stretch as far back as the 18<sup>th</sup> century with Marquis de Sade’s highly scandalous erotic prose. “The critical edge that defined Sade’s “philosophy of the bedroom” was taken up in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century as a philosophy of transgression that posited sexuality as its primary force. Therefore, the link between sexuality and transgression – which is central to Foucault’s “ A Preface” is derived from a Sadean philosophy of erotics.” (Urrutia 2008: 2) Though de Sade’s narratives relied heavily on sexual deviance, some similarities could be drawn with, for example, *Juliette* and *Fight Club*. When discussing the controversial work of Samuel R. Delany’s Hogg, Hume (2011: 132) mentions a connection with Marquis de Sade:

He [Delany] describes *Juliette* as a pornographic novel in which a woman becomes aware of the hypocritical pressures placed on women by men so as to rule them, and proceeds to break every rule and law she can in order to get whatever she wants. Only thus, and doing great damage to others, can she win her own freedom. While Delany agrees with the marquis on the situation of women, he focuses instead on a man who similarly wins freedom from the rules

that society would impose on him. Insofar as we follow Hogg imaginatively, we too experience a reflected version of such freedom.

While the subject matter and the “transgressions” of *Juliette* and *Fight Club* are different, their key idea is quite similar: achieving personal freedom through transgression in a society where the protagonist is oppressed either sexually or spiritually. In the case of *Fight Club*, the obvious comparison would be the portrayal of masculinity and inner turmoil, where the narrator’s frustration and subsequent failure to express his emotions and cry will lead to the “creation” Tyler Durden and, consequently, the fight club and Project Mayhem.

The most common definition for transgressive literature is fiction featuring characters that struggle with societal norms and taboos. It is not an incorrect one, but I would like to lean on Foucault (1977) on defining transgressive literature for the use of this study. I define transgressive fiction as a genre that deals with the “underbelly” of the human experience, it pushes our limits, encourages us to face the reality of our world we are often conditioned to ignore or not talk about, for example, rape (Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange*) or madness (Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*). Transgressive works of fiction invite discussion and controversy but their ultimate meaning rarely lies in the shock value the controversial topics may provide. The current study greatly relies on this aspect, as the importance of transgression in the novel can be as varied or one-sided as the person conducting the study decides, for the meanings created through transgression can be interpreted in a multitude of ways or taken entirely at face value.

As I will establish in this research, the use of transgression is not to merely shock or upset readers, instead for example, it could be considered as means to tell an often conventional story in an unconventional manner. *Fight Club*, in a way, could be classified as a tale of romance between a man and a

woman – the narrator meets Marla Singer, there is conflict and at the end of the novel there is love, but it is rarely, if ever, referred to as a romantic novel, yet *Fight Club* is partly an unconventional love story from the viewpoint of a person with dissociative identity disorder. As such, the use of transgression as a narrative device can be responsible for creating additional complexity and depth in the story, which the current thesis will try to analyse.

### 3.2. Approaching Transgression in *Fight Club*

Transgression in *Fight Club* is multi-dimensional: it manifests in the themes within the novel, narrative devices and in the language that is used throughout the novel. These three dimensions constitute the basis for my analysis. For the sake of clarity, I have further divided these into separate subchapters.

Firstly, I will analyse how transgression is represented in the themes of the novel. I have chosen the two most common themes discussed within the context of *Fight Club*:

- a) gender roles, particularly the masculine identity
- b) criticism of the consumerist society

Secondly, I will investigate the importance of transgression as a narrative device within the novel. Narrative devices include the moments in the novel that propel the plot in a certain direction, for the purposes of this thesis I have further divided these devices into three:

- a) stream of consciousness
- b) non-linearity

c) unreliable narrator

All of these aspects are important towards the storyline and are entwined by the narrator's "transgression" – insomnia and mental illness.

The third and final category of analysing transgressive fiction in *Fight Club* is language and language devices employed by the author. Those can be divided into two:

a) minimalistic style

b) repetition

The reason for these particular points of narrative and language analysis is that these are the aspects that are a) highly discussed in the transgressive fiction discourse (for example, themes like gender) or b) not commonly discussed in relation to transgression, which I will try link on my own with relevant theory in each topic, for example, minimalism. Minimalism is demonstrably present in *Fight Club*, but not usually discussed in the context of transgression. The assumption is that the language used in the novel is significant in showing the narrator's mental illness (which is tied to transgression), therefore, in the chapter dedicated to analysing the language in *Fight Club*, I will try to give examples of such occasions and prove that the link between transgression and language is significant enough to warrant a spot in this analysis.

Considering that the scope of the thesis is rather limited, the current study will present these aspects in a concentrated form, focusing on the most relevant or discussed subjects in each category. I will provide ample evidence for each topic, through which I will prove that the aspects I am about to discuss are highly interlinked with one another, making each of

these themes, language and narrative devices important in discovering and proving the significance of transgression in *Fight Club*.

These categories are by no means exhaustive, but they offer a concise approach of how the different dimensions of transgression in *Fight Club* can be analysed. With the aid of literature from previous scholars, the study presents only one of the many approaches to look at transgressive writing.

## 4 READING FIGHT CLUB

The current chapter will focus on the plot of the novel to remove the possibility of any discrepancies between the plot of the film and the plot of the novel. I will then discuss the life and work of Palahniuk himself as one of the most prolific transgressive authors alive today.

### 4.1. The Plot

*Fight Club* is a story about a young man (referred to as “the narrator”) with a mundane and predictable life, who becomes increasingly unstable as a result of insomnia.

The novel begins with a man named Tyler Durden holding a gun barrel in the mouth of the narrator while a countdown to an explosion of the Parker-Morris Building is taking place. The narrator claims to know how to make nitro-glycerine because Tyler knows it. He claims the other method of mixing paraffin has never worked for him. The chapter ends as three minutes are left on the countdown.

It is “present day” and the narrator starts attending support groups for people with various terminal diseases. The narrator describes losing all hope as real freedom, and, how crying together with the sick and dying finally gave him the ability to sleep at night. In several of his group meetings, though, he becomes increasingly aware of another “tourist” in their midst, Marla Singer. Her reason for visiting the support groups was that she felt alive when surrounded by death, but, like the narrator, Marla is not terminally ill herself. As Marla’s lie is a reflection of the narrator’s lie, he begins to struggle with insomnia once again, so he confronts her after one of

the meetings. The narrator suggests they divide up the meetings between them so he could attend these meetings undisturbed again. Marla agrees and so begins a volatile relationship.

The narrator befriends a peculiar man named Tyler Durden on a nude beach. Tyler is a reflection of the qualities the narrator wishes he had: he is charming, brave and unpredictable. The two men will come to share an abandoned house on Paper Street, as the narrator's expensive apartment was blown up under highly suspicious circumstances. This unlikely friendship paves way to an "exclusive club" created by the two men, an underground fighting ring with strict rules of secrecy. The men involved in the fights are commonly "blue-collar workers", ordinary men with unsatisfactory lives who seek to release their stress through controlled physical violence. Tyler Durden becomes more and more a symbol of anarchy and freedom for the men that participate in fight club, who were all "working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need" (FC: 149). Inevitably so, Tyler's influence starts to creep into the outside world, as he sends these fighters to complete increasingly perilous acts of vandalism, from starting fights with regular people (FC: 119) to causing massive property damage of government buildings (FC: 121).

By now, Fight club is "officially" no more, and under Tyler Durden's rule it sheds its purpose as a fighting ring for men to let off some steam, instead becoming Project Mayhem, Tyler's small army of guerrilla fighters. Instead of rifles, these men carried out their duties with wire cutters and spray cans. Marla calls them his "disciples". At this point, Marla had become intimately involved with Tyler, much to the narrator's disapproval. Marla's affection towards the men was met with indifference from Tyler and disgust from the narrator, who, perhaps, felt some jealousy for the two. Marla describes herself as being "confused and afraid to commit to the wrong thing so she won't commit to anything" (FC: 61), so the dysfunctional dynamic of the love

triangle makes her keep visiting Tyler despite the narrator's apparent annoyance.

After a while, the narrator becomes concerned about his friend's behaviour, as fight club had suddenly become sinister in nature, and now Tyler is in constant hiding, avoiding his questions about the purpose of Project Mayhem. The narrator is becoming increasingly aware of the discrepancies between what he believes is true and how the people around him are treating him. For example, Marla Singer, in her frustration about the narrator, tells him that she doesn't understand why he sleeps with her, only to treat her with disdain the next morning. She claims his name is Tyler Durden, and the narrator's confusion about the reality grows.

After increasingly erratic behaviour, Tyler decides to meet the narrator and confirms his suspicion as the narrator's alter ego. Meanwhile, Project Mayhem prepares for its next move – multiple explosions targeting the city's financial district. While struggling with Tyler for dominance on the rooftop overlooking the targeted bank buildings, Marla and a group of people from the support groups appear and convince the narrator to drop the handgun he held to his mouth. He warns them about the imminent explosion but realizes Tyler had mixed the nitro-glycerine with paraffin. The police helicopters circle the building and as the tension is rising, the narrator, in a desperate final move, pulls the trigger.

The last chapter takes place in an asylum. The narrator, believing he is now in Heaven, still receives letters from Marla. Every now and then someone with a bruised face brings him his food and medication, confirming that "everything is going as according to plan" and "we look forward to getting you back" (FC: 208).



## 4.2. A Short Biography of Chuck Palahniuk

Charles Michael Palahniuk (1962) grew up in Burbank, Washington with five siblings. Palahniuk graduated from the University of Oregon, School of Journalism in 1986. His fiction writing career started in the 90s with a writing workshop with Tom Spanbauer. Although his novel *Invisible Monsters* was the first novel he wrote, it was rejected by the publisher due to its dark nature, leading him to work on an even darker novel and his most famous work to date, *Fight Club*, possibly to spite the publisher that rejected his initial work. The novel itself started as a short story – “the rules of Fight Club”, which became chapter 6 of the *Fight Club* (FC: 215). This set of rules was Palahniuk’s attempt to encompass the entire essence of a story in seven pages, without losing the reader in the process. At this point, Palahniuk thought about creating a story of a club where you ask someone to fight, the way one would ask a someone to dance or to a game of pool (FC: 213). Despite its difficult beginnings, *Fight Club* would become a film in the next few years with an impressive cast. Since then, Palahniuk has published 18 works of fiction, including *Survivor* (1999), *Invisible Monsters* (1999), *Choke* (2001) and *Lullaby* (2002), yet his first published novel, *Fight Club*, remains among the most discussed in transgressive fiction discourse.

Palahniuk’s influences include Amy Hempel, Denis Johnson as a fellow contemporary minimalist and the classics ranging from F. Scott Fitzgerald to Edgar Allan Poe. Palahniuk’s fondness for minimalism has made him consider creating a “How To” book on minimalism, but it is currently said to be on the backburner.

The inspiration and subject matter for his books is often inspired by real life events or stories. His inspiration for *Fight Club* came partially from an altercation he had while camping with some friends. When Palahniuk went

to work on Monday with a bruised face, his colleges pretended to not notice. Aside from his work as a writer, Palahniuk has also worked as a film projectionist among other jobs. This may sound familiar from *Fight Club*, as Tyler Durden (or rather, the narrator as Tyler Durden) worked as a projectionist where he spliced pornographic imagery into films. These kinds of stories of mischief that are spread among workers of low income jobs unsurprisingly became a popular part of *Fight Club*, as fans of the book would often tell stories to Palahniuk about having spoiled their wealthy customers' food as waiters (*FC*: 215), much like Tyler Durden did in the novel.

Palahniuk has also been enjoying success outside of literature. Aside from *Fight Club*'s film adaptation, Palahniuk's novel *Choke* has made it onto the big screen, with *Lullaby* and *Rant* in the works. His short fiction "Romance" was also made into a short film in 2012.

Palahniuk continues his prolific writing career with annual releases up to this point.

## 5 ANALYSING TRANSGRESSION IN THEMES

The themes pertaining to *Fight Club* are arguably the most discussed aspects of transgressive writing in general. This is mostly due to the fact that transgression in writing often elicits a strong emotional response due to the topics represented within the novel, which are often violent and sexual in nature. This invites controversy, and, as a result, discussion in the academic sphere. Palahniuk's works as one of the most prolific transgressive writers alive today have captured the attention of many researchers before me. I will now analyse transgression in *Fight Club* according to the thematic aspect of the novel and offer some interesting examples.

### 5.1. Masculine Identity in *Fight Club*

Additionally to the language and the narrative aspects of transgression, the current study also discusses the portrayal of gender roles in *Fight Club*, as this is one of the most discussed themes regarding the novel. Over time, *Fight Club* has been subject to a wide array of interpretations regarding gender and masculinity. According to the common stereotype of a man, men should be the providers for the family and also remain unaffected by strong emotions. Playing on this kind of stereotype, Palahniuk creates an outlet for men and their repressed feelings and frustrations about their lives: the fight club. The men in fight club fight, thus, letting out their aggression in a controlled environment with strict rules, for example, the fight must end when one of the fighters "taps out". This means that the fights taking place in the club were not personal in nature or require extreme physical fitness, but the club acted as more of a "support group", the kind the narrator would frequent before his run-in with Marla Singer. Rather than using words, the men would use their fists to let out their negative emotions. For the narrator,

fight club replaced support groups, even when Tyler Durden's actions became increasingly concerning. In the afterword of *Fight Club*, Palahniuk claims:

At the same time, the bookstores were full of books like *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* and *How to Make an American Quilt*. These were all novels that presented a social model for women to be together. To sit together and tell their stories. To share their lives. But there was no novel that presented a new social model for men to share their lives. (FC: 214)

In Palahniuk's words, *Fight Club* was created out of a need for emotional release for men and in the fashion of a postmodernist novel, this release was through violent means. As a result, *Fight Club* has been scrutinised by critics for the portrayal of "hyper-masculinity" and "warrior culture" (Giroux xxxx). As such, many academics have taken the analysis of gender in *Fight Club* further to understand its role in the novel, especially with the recent popularity growth in the study of transgressive literature. As such, I will briefly introduce some of the most interesting theories regarding gender interpretation in *Fight Club*.

An important topic regarding masculinity in *Fight Club* is the absence of a father figure and this is referenced multiple times in the novel. As discussed earlier, Tyler Durden, the main aggregate behind the creation of fight club, is a part of the narrator's split personality, fuelled by his insomnia, which manifests itself after he has trouble opening himself up again in his support groups. The important aspect is why the narrator's split personality was created in the first place and why the narrator felt little satisfaction in his stable and comfortable life. Alex Tuss (2004) claims in his article regarding masculine identity in *Fight Club* that the reasoning behind this is the narrator's fatherless upbringing, due to the negative impact of the lack of a father figure on a child's development: "All three fictions confront their readers with cautionary tales about the scarifying results that occur when the

fatherless and abandoned, misshapen by the societies that reject them, return to plague their creators." (100) The narrator's bitterness regarding an absent father is referenced multiple times in *Fight Club*: "...I asked Tyler what he'd been fighting. Tyler says, his father. Maybe we didn't need a father to complete ourselves." (54), and "If you're male and you're Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do you believe about God?" (141) The narrator's lack of a father figure could be indirectly to blame for his inexplicable unhappiness in a comfortable life. Palahniuk claims the narrator's actions are indeed fuelled by a lack of a father figure, but it has more to do with "power" than sex:

The adult is the wall or resistance against which a child can test himself. It's by battling the adult parent that the child learns to endure and to become stronger. I'd argue that this conflict works best between same sex parents and children. In a world of absent fathers, the son tends to test himself against society or the law, forming groups with other fatherless sons to support each other in shared battles with this larger authority. Power lies with the individual who succeeds at larger and larger goals, constantly seeking challenges in order to grow. Personal power cannot be defined by the "other" without losing power to that other and becoming used by - a reaction to - that other. Patriarchal or matriarchal or whatever. (Kavanagh 2009: 191)

The narrator/Tyler Durden creates an outlet for the "fatherless" to regain some of this lost power through physical violence and destructive behaviour. Whether or not the men participating in fight club are literally fatherless is irrelevant, as the key is power and restoring control over one's life which has been taken by the unhappiness of the "9-5" desk jobs the fighters would often have to attend during working hours.

As a result of his unhappiness in life, whether as a result of his fatherlessness or not, the narrator was misguidedly trying to achieve this happiness through materialistic things, for example, filling his collection of Ikea furniture for his apartment: "It took my whole life to buy this stuff...Then

you're trapped in your nest, and the things that you used to own, now they own you." (FC: 44) Tyler Durden as the antithesis of the narrator believes in spiritual elevation through destruction.

### Example 1

Tyler says I'm nowhere near hitting the bottom, yet. And if I don't fall all the way, I can't be saved. Jesus did it with his crucifixion thing. I shouldn't just abandon money and property and knowledge. This isn't just a weekend retreat. I should run from self-improvement, and I should be running towards disaster. I can't just play it safe anymore..."It's only after you've lost everything," Tyler says, "that you're free to do anything." (FC: 70)

It is unclear, though, whether Tyler's grand plan was never fight club, but Project Mayhem, or was the escalation a part of the narrator's mental illness becoming more severe over time, gaining more and more control over his actions. While the intent of fight club and Project Mayhem thereafter was violent in nature, Palahniuk does not imply that the answer to any restraints set upon men by society is pure aggression. Rather, the story reflects on the narrator's need to better himself through destructive means, and he pays the price of being institutionalized for the havoc he was responsible for. Even Palahniuk himself calls it a very "socially responsible novel" (Kavanagh 187) where the loose ends are tied up and the narrator is punished for his misdeeds in the end.

Hume (2011: 148) suggests an explanation for the violence in *Fight Club* – the purpose of the insanity of the narrator could be to fill a gap in the life of the modern human who avoids aggression and pain:

Palahniuk's may be a romanticized view of insanity (and of fighting and of social mayhem), but the very attractiveness testifies that something is lacking in our society. A warrior experiences fear, challenge, practice in enduring pain, and the adrenaline surge of a fight. These are now missing in most people's lives, yet are something that myths, legends, and initiation rites suggest are

desirable and enabling. Palahniuk makes us rethink assumptions about insanity and society, and if those are in need of redefinition, then so too may be our sense of reality.

According to Hume's interpretation, Tyler Durden is a tool to return to an age where a man's physical prowess determined his success as a hunter and a procreator, as opposed to the modern society that values thought over physical engagements in many facets of life.

It is possible, then, that the aggression in the book is less of a gendered issue and rather means of finding enlightenment through destruction, which does not depend on gender. Furthermore, the character of Marla Singer, similar to the narrator, finds comfort in support groups because it makes her feel closer to death. The difference is in the way the characters decide to alleviate their apparent existential crisis.

There are multiple ways in which the gender roles and the masculine identity could be analysed even further. Paul Kennett (2009: 48) offers a view based on the Oedipal complex, where Tyler Durden is not his alter ego but a manifestation of the classic Oedipal complex. In an earlier quote from the book, a father figure was compared to a God and Kennett claims that the desire to be noticed and punished by God are the key aspects of the Oedipal complex and Tyler's anger and frustration is the result of his status not being recognized. (Kennett 2009: 51) Moreover, Kennett suggests that in such an Oedipal family structure a man "is not the master of himself until he has children, especially sons, of his own to control" which he explains with Tyler's "disciples" or space monkeys that carry out the tasks of Project Mayhem (ibid 56-57).

As mentioned before, gender is undoubtedly one of the most discussed topics regarding *Fight Club* and has been accused of glorifying violence.

Bennett (2009: 69) suggests that, if *Fight Club* is truly just a male power fantasy, then why “do Palahniuk and Fincher expend so much energy depicting male subjects not only in, but actually enjoying, various states of psychological and physical crisis?” He presents a possibility that an angle that focuses only on the social imagery may result in a shallow analysis of the book that merely skims the surface of the underlying philosophies and motives. It is important to note Palahniuk’s own response to a question regarding gender in his book:

I consider my characters to have no race or gender. They each represent a dynamic that moves the plot, prompting other characters to take action. Doing this, they act out or demonstrate human behaviors and fallacies to comic effect. Even if the characters are destroyed or remain unenlightened, I hope the reader recognizes their errors and is less likely to make those same mistakes.  
(Kavanagh 2009: 190)

When taking into account Palahniuk’s thoughts on gender representation in his book, it is less a criticism of the traditional male stereotype of not showing emotions, but more of a “case study” of an unhealthy way of dealing with personal issues (narrator fakes terminal diseases to be able to open up about his problems and cry, failing to do so leads to the “birth” of Tyler Durden). From this perspective, attributing the narrator’s actions on gender alone would be to remove the complexity of the character entirely.

According to Bennett’s article, the way Palahniuk depicts his characters has less to do with gender stereotypes and more about their personal struggles with existentialism. This is supported by Palahniuk’s own words about his characters being without race and gender. Kaufmann (1975) discusses a similar point in his study of existentialism in Dostoevsky’s work, where readers and critics were eager to attribute to Dostoevsky the opinions of the Grand Inquisitor Ivan from *The Brothers Karamazov*, though Dostoevsky himself was anti-Catholic: “We have no right whatsoever to attribute to him the opinions of all his most interesting characters. Unfortunately, most



readers fail to distinguish between Dostoevsky's views and those of the Grand Inquisitor Ivan's story in *The Brothers Karamazov*... and many critics take for Dostoevsky's reasoned arguments the strange views of Kirilov, though he is mad." (9) Bennett argues that literary critics should give writers the benefit of a doubt and attempt to analyse their work without prejudice. This is extremely important when dealing with transgressive fiction, as the topics are, like in the case of *Fight Club*, controversial and spark debates regarding morality. "Understanding a verbal structure literally is the incommunicable act of total apprehension which precedes criticism... Every genuine response to art, whether critically formulated or not, must begin in the same way, in a complete surrender of the mind and senses to the impact of the work of art as a whole" (Bennett 2009: 248). Frye (2006:450) states that:

The literary writer isn't giving information, either about a subject or about his state of mind: he's trying to let something take on its own form, whether it's a poem or play or novel or whatever. That's why you can't produce literature voluntarily, in the way you'd write a letter or a report. That's also why it's no use telling the poet that he ought to write in a different way so you can understand him better. The writer of literature can only write out what takes shape in his mind.

As such, assigning political and social implications to Palahniuk's text may be an unavailing endeavour, as the meanings we create from reading a specific piece of writing may differ from what the author was thinking at the time of writing. Regardless, Palahniuk's own thoughts about how his work is interpreted are quite liberal, though: "My goal has never been to protect and defend my work. A finished book is dead to me" (Kavanagh 188).

Both Bennett and Andrew Hock Soon Ng (2009) discuss a theory, in which the "muscle culture" represented in *Fight Club* is very closely tied to existentialism, mainly relying on the theories of philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, involving the sadistic and egotistic tendencies of the narrator. Ng claims that Tyler's ideas regarding achieving enlightenment through

destruction are very much connected to Sartre's theories regarding nothingness: "in order for the *self* to exist, it is necessary that the unity of this being include its own nothingness as the nihilation of identity" (Sartre 1956: 125). Relying on Sartre, Ng proposes that Tyler's search for destruction as self-actualisation is inherently connected to Sartre's idea of "identity nihilation": "the "past" which the Narrator seeks to transcend *via* Tyler is his temporal *angst* instituted by a postmodern bourgeois existence. The Narrator must return to "ground zero" - to becoming nothing, as it were - in order to undo the processes which have resulted in his current situation." (Ng 2009: 125-6) Those particular theories rely on Tyler as manifestation of the narrator's ego-libido and the narrator's aggression as a result of a threat to said ego-libido, e.g. when the narrator brutalises one of the fight club members he refers to as "beautiful", he attempts to maintain his attraction to himself (Ng 2009: 121).

*Fight Club* allows a plethora of ways in which the role of man, father and gender stereotypes could be analysed. It is certainly hinted by Palahniuk himself that the absence of a father figure had a detrimental effect on the narrator's mind, and that Tyler Durden was his way of channelling his frustration with his own life, but he also claims that his characters should be analysed outside of their gender and race. This means that Palahniuk himself does not attempt a deep dissection of the social implications of *Fight Club*, but rather hints that the narrator's destructive attitudes are his way of fighting his own personal demons, an act that does not rely on race or gender.

The analysis of gender is surely an interesting angle of the study of *Fight Club* and I have introduced multiple ways in which the theme could be dissected, though one must be wary of oversimplifying Palahniuk's characters, as their depth is greater than the obvious gender stereotypes (aggressive and violent men) represented in the narrative.

## 5.2. The Consumerist Prison and Tyler Durden's Cult

*I was nobody: I might have turned out to be a country doctor. A man finds himself singled out, isolated and alone: People are attracted and come. – C. G. Jung.*

Michel Foucault's influential theories regarding transgression also included the idea of the modern prison. Since Foucault's (1979) ideas on transgression are particularly fascinating, I have dedicated a sub-chapter in focusing on the implications of a consumerist society as portrayed in *Fight Club*. Foucault's and Riecki's (2009) approach on *Fight Club* portrayal of the consumerist society as the modern prison, since idea is very closely connected to the main point of analysis of this chapter – transgression in themes. Similarly to Foucault, Riecki (2009: 89) discusses Palahniuk's works regarding the theme of prison, making his analysis a valuable resource for this approach. Additionally, I will look at this societal oppression as the key to the creation of Tyler Durden's cult-like "army of space monkeys" named Project Mayhem.

By now, we have established the connection of the narrator's reasons for his mental illness to his particular way of life, which is connected to his comfortable way of living. Foucault's ideas of society as prison, linked with "carceral apparatuses" (Foucault 1979) is an apt metaphor to describe the society in which the narrator of *Fight Club* resides in. Instead of actual prison cells, however, the modern consumerist society traps people with false ideals. This kind of "self-improvement through money" is a familiar concept in *Fight Club*, as Tyler Durden is the manifestation of the narrator's rebellion against the "Ikea lifestyle" he lived before his insomnia and mental illness developed. The narrator describes the apartment and the furniture in it not just as material objects but "his entire life" (FC: 111). In order to free himself from these constraints, the narrator as Tyler Durden sabotages his own

apartment and the explosion that follows will pave way for the narrator to embrace Tyler's ideals of spiritual elevation through destruction (*FC*: 110), even if his former way of life is destroyed in the process.

This is Marxist warfare, class struggle on the page, the crux of Palahniuk's attack. That attack is meant to create an awakening, a dystopian representation of the hassle of modern day convenience. Palahniuk's stream of mansions with foyers and fireplaces, these ideological symbols of elite disregard for poverty, serve as center stage for Palahniuk's first three novels. Also at center stage, as well as equally symbolic, are the characters themselves, their bodies portrayed alternately as houses and temples. Palahniuk's people exemplify the debilitating effects of the hegemonic control of capitalism; they demonstrate that control, *show* that control. (Riecki 2009: 97)

In a way, the narrator's issues of being confined in a consumerist way of life reflect on the larger issues of modern society. Tyler Durden becomes god-like for his "space monkeys" because he resonates with the hopeless – people that feel trapped in their lives as much as the narrator. The move from an uncouth but harmless fight club to guerrilla warfare on capitalism is sudden but not unnatural. In a "carceral prison" of the modern society, as Foucault (1977) puts in, Tyler's voice is amplified as his views on achieving spiritual elevation deviate from the norm and offer an escape for his followers who may feel like there is nothing left to lose. This is why the members of fight club move to Project Mayhem without hesitation – Tyler offers them purpose. Jung (1917: 152) refers to such a phenomenon as "godlikeness":

In his identification with the collective psyche he will namely infallibly try to force the demands of his unconscious upon others, for identity with the collective psyche always brings with it a feeling of universal validity ('godlikeness') which simply ignores the differences in psychology of his fellow human beings.

Tyler's pursuit of his self-improvement and spiritual elevation could have been conducted in solitude, but he accepts new members into the "space monkey ranks" – Tyler wants and requires a following for himself, implying

possible egotism and a search for validity as a part of the reason why Tyler assumes the role of the leader in Project Mayhem; thus, creating an entity that shares striking similarities to a cult: "Everybody in Project Mayhem is a part of Tyler Durden, and vice versa." (FC: 155) One of the reasons that makes Project Mayhem cult-like is that new members join because of Tyler Durden's "legendary" reputation:

#### Example 2

"Everybody in Project Mayhem knows, Mr. Durden." The bartender holds up his hand, the back of his hand towards me, a kiss burned into the back of his hand.

My kiss?

Tyler's kiss.

"Everybody knows about the birthmark," the bartender says. "It's a part of the legend. You're turning into a fucking legend, man." (FC: 159)

This is adoration of Tyler Durden as a "legend" is connected to Jung's idea of the archetype of the prophet as the catalyst in cult-making:

...Besides the possibility of becoming a prophet, there is yet another subtler and apparently more legitimate joy, namely to become the disciple of the prophet...Mental laziness becomes a virtue; one can enjoy the sun of an at least semidivine being... Naturally the disciples always close in together, not out of love, but for the very understandable purpose of effortlessly confirming their own convictions by engendering collective agreement. (Jung 1917: 264-5)

Shamdasani (1998: 82) refers to this as the "psychology of the cult-making process", which takes place through the identification of the cult-leader with the prophet archetype and the follower with the disciple archetype.

According to Sonu, even if one does not agree with Jung's use of archetypes to explain the emergence of a cult, one can still appreciate Jung's "perceptiveness" when describing the process (1998: 82).

Another method of analysing the theme of consumerism is through community. Palahniuk has stated that in his fiction, the characters often suffer from isolation that is caused by materialistic pursuits. This type of isolation can only be reversed when the characters “destroy their success” and “force themselves back into the community” (Kavanagh 2009: 187). Casado da Rocha (2005: 114) describes Palahniuk’s characters attempting to “return to community” as a way of fighting existential crisis: “This kind of small community “whose movements at every moment are known”, like a club or a cult, is very close to the sort of solutions to existential crisis that can be found in Palahniuk’s fiction. Because if we cannot gather together in the face of anything other than violence, sex, trance, and horror, at least we can commiserate.” *Fight Club*’s narrator must also break free from his lonely consumerist life to “join the community” again to seek salvation (Kavanagh 2009: 187).

## 6 TRANSGRESSION AS A NARRATIVE DEVICE

### 6.1. Stream of Consciousness

As a part of my reading of *Fight Club*, I will try to analyse the novel in the perspective of narrative theory, or rather, how or if the transgression within the novel contributes to the narrative. This requires an elaboration of related terms I will be using as a part of said analysis. To start off, I will be discussing the narrative aspects of stream of consciousness, the unreliable narrator and non-linearity. I will expand on the reasoning behind these choices in chapter 3. According to Robert Humphrey (1954: 1), it is tough to accurately pinpoint the meaning of “stream of consciousness”, much like “symbolism” or “romanticism”, it is often used vaguely despite of its appearance as a concrete term. However, he suggests that, despite of the rather liberal use of the phrase, the literary term of stream of consciousness of a character is based on psychology; therefore, it can be defined in a more concrete manner.

In an article regarding stream of consciousness, William James offers a brilliant metaphor of a bird’s life to illustrate its meaning:

When we take a general view of the wonderful stream of our consciousness, what strikes us first is the different pace of its parts. Like a bird's life, it seems to be an alternation of flights and perchings. The rhythm of language expresses this, where every thought is expressed in a sentence, and every sentence closed by a period. The resting-places are usually occupied by sensorial imaginations of some sort, whose peculiarity is that they can be held before the mind for an indefinite time, and contemplated without changing; the places of flight are filled with thoughts of relations, static or dynamic, that for the most part obtain between the matters contemplated in the periods of comparative rest. (James)

James' metaphor for stream of consciousness encapsulates the essence of the narrative device – a text that portrays stream of consciousness is a flow of thoughts of relations with “perchings” of descriptions of senses.

Humphrey (1954: 4) offers a more concrete definition, in that stream-of-consciousness fiction is “greatly concerned with what lies below the surface”, leaving aside the confusing aspect of multiple levels of human consciousness that merely serves to muddy the waters. Rather, the stream of consciousness narrative simply deals with the psyche of the characters in a work of fiction. Considering the rather “trendy” nature of the label “stream of consciousness”, Humphrey (1954: 6) stresses that defining novels as stream of consciousness fiction is a slippery slope on which many have lost their footing, and it is important to start analysing the phenomenon from both a literary and a psychological standpoint. This is as relevant of an issue nowadays as it was nearly 60 years ago when Humphrey's analysis of stream of consciousness in the modern novel was first published. He defines the essence of stream-of-consciousness fiction thus:

“...stream-of-consciousness literature is concerned with the mental and spiritual experience – both the whatness and the howness of it. The whatness includes the categories of mental experiences: sensations, memories, imaginations, conceptions, and intuitions. The howness includes the symbolizations, the feelings, and the processes of association.” (ibid 7)

The definition by Humphrey is important when moving forward in this analysis. The stream of consciousness narrative technique is commonly associated with writers such as Virginia Woolf or James Joyce, as their novels concern the inner workings of their characters. For this reason, it is a rather interesting idea to analyse *Fight Club* in terms of stream of consciousness and whether or not it corresponds with common characteristics of stream of consciousness and if so, offer some examples.



Furthermore, stream of consciousness is connected to other aspects of the narrative that will be discussed later in the thesis. The main idea of it is that stream of consciousness is directly connected with the mind, dealing with the memories and thoughts of a character in a story. This enables shifts in time, as the memories deal with past events and thoughts may reflect on current events, which is the main reason for the non-linearity found in the story. Additionally, shifts in time are rather important when discussing the effect of mental illness, or, transgression, on the narrative. The story of *Fight Club* unfolds through the thoughts of the narrator and it is not uncommon for the narrator to confuse the reader about when certain events are taking place.

What is more, if we take into consideration Humphrey's idea about stream of consciousness being related to memories, thoughts and sensations, these time leaps involve memories that rely on the narrator's knowledge of the past events, but since we have already determined the deceptive nature of the narrator's memories, this proposal of the technique of the stream of consciousness in *Fight Club* is supported by the unreliable narrator phenomenon which is highly discussed in the transgressive fiction discourse. As the name suggests, the term describes a narrator that misleads or deceives the reader, which is the reason behind the shocking twist at the end of the novel - the narrator and Tyler Durden are the same person.

Due to this fact, I have included stream of consciousness as a part of this analysis, though it is not usually discussed in the context of *Fight Club*. As the connections between these narrative devices in *Fight Club* have now been established, it becomes easier to observe the significance of transgression in the narrative. Relying on the "whatness" and "howness" of the mental experience of the narrator in *Fight Club*, I will provide some interesting examples.

When the reader inevitably finds out about the narrator's dissociative identity disorder, the lines between the thoughts of the narrator and reality become blurry, but it also makes certain word choices and sentence structures finally make sense. In order to illustrate this point, I will examine an excerpt from the novel regarding an interaction between the narrator and his boss. I have provided a rather lengthy sequence in its entirety due to the importance of showing the narrator's erratic thoughts in the context of the events in the novel. The following excerpt is an interaction between the narrator and his boss regarding the narrator's unkempt looks and blood on his clothes.

### Example 3

My boss sends me home because of all the dried blood on my pants, and I am overjoyed.

... You give up all your worldly possessions and your car and go live in a rented house in the toxic waste part of town where late and night, you can hear Marla and Tyler in his room, calling each other human butt wipe

...Just by contrast, this makes me the calm little center of the world.

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.

...Look. Outside the window. A bird.

My boss asked if the blood was my blood.

The bird flies downwind. I'm writing a little haiku in my head.

Without just one nest

A bird can call the world home

Life is your career

I'm counting on my fingers: five, seven, five.

The blood, is it mine?

Yeah, I say. Some of it.

This is a wrong answer.

Like this is a big deal. I have two pair of black trousers. Six white shirts. Six pair of underwear. The bare minimum. I go to fight club. These things happen.

"Go home," my boss says. "Get changed." (FC: 64)

This is followed by a continuation of the narrator discussing the relationship between Tyler and Marla. In the provided sequence, the narrator is asked to return home by his boss due to the narrator's inappropriate appearance. However, except for the boss' words at the end, the entire sequence is going on in the narrator's mind. At this point, the narrator has become increasingly disconnected from the real world, so his thoughts jump from one topic to another: from Marla and Tyler having sex, to seeing a bird outside his office window. Regardless of the jumps in thought, the sequence is not confusing or hard to follow. The sequence attempts to contrast the narrator's "enlightened mind" with the unpleasant reality, which is well illustrated in this section: "Look. Outside the window. A bird. My boss asked me if the blood was my blood. The bird flies downwind." (FC: 64)

The text of this particular sequence illustrates a mind already succumbed to mental illness. At this certain point in the story, Tyler's grasp on the narrator's life is tightening and the narrator is starting to worry the people that are a part of his "normal life" outside fight club. The presented example appears to fit James' description of stream of consciousness – thoughts of relations with sensorial imaginations "scattered" throughout, which according to James could be contemplated indefinitely. The action of this excerpt was a simple conversation between the narrator and his boss about the blood on the narrator's shirt and how he should go home. However, in his mind he describes himself as the "calm center of the world" with dried blood and injured face, acting erratic when communicating with his co-workers. The narrator is enamoured with the idea of his own enlightenment through violence that he feels less and less connected to the normal life he had before he "met" Tyler Durden, so he makes no attempt to appear "presentable", nor does he respect the common consensus of appropriate public behaviour: "HELLO! Look at me. HELLO! I am so ZEN. This is BLOOD. This is NOTHING. Hello. Everything is nothing, and it's so cool to be ENLIGHTENED. Like me." (FC: 64), a sequence where he is supposedly

yelling at his co-workers to brag about being “enlightened”. The action that is taking place (the narrator’s boss is inquiring about the blood on the shirt) is essentially paused in time while the narrator jumps back in time to a memory of his current living situation (Tyler and Marla spending time together) and jumps to creating haikus before his boss ends the conversation by asking him to go home. The description of his inner thoughts could certainly be contemplated indefinitely, but the narrator’s boss interrupts his thought flow with a stern command.

Another great example would be the “dialogue” taking place in the narrator’s mind:

#### Example 4

The world is going crazy. My boss is dead. My home is gone. My job  
is gone. And I am responsible for it all.  
There is nothing left.  
I’m overdrawn at the bank.  
Step over the edge.  
What else is there?  
Step over the edge.  
There’s Marla.  
Jump over the edge.  
There’s Marla, and she’s in the middle of everything and doesn’t  
know it.  
And she loves you.  
She loves Tyler.  
She doesn’t know the difference.  
Somebody has to tell her. Get out. Get out. Get out.  
Save yourself. (FC: 193)

In this example, it is clear that the author is talking to someone in his mind. It is likely that the “other side” of the conversation is Tyler, rather than encouraging him to step over the edge of the tall building the narrator is currently standing on, he is encouraging him to “step over the edge” into madness. The narrator has been heavily resisting Tyler’s control, but the narrator’s death would mean the death of Tyler Durden. As a result, Tyler is

encouraging him to release control and reminding him that Marla is his reason to live.

These examples of jumps between events and erratic thoughts are commonplace as the novel progresses, as stream of consciousness can be a brilliant tool to highlight the inner workings of the mind, which in the case of *Fight Club* include a mind hindered by dissociative identity disorder, which can only be accurately portrayed with a glimpse into the affected person's mind. At the end of the novel, Tyler Durden is revealed to have only existed in the mind of the narrator, so vivid descriptions and jumps of thought and time are crucial in laying the foundation for the reader's deception regarding the narrator's mental illness and Tyler's identity.

## 6.2. The Unreliable Narrator

One of the most interesting narrative devices employed by Palahniuk in *Fight Club* is the "unreliable narrator" device. The unreliable narrator device is also the reason for the plot twist in the end – the narrator is in belief that Tyler Durden is another person entirely, and also successfully fools the readers until the reveal in the penultimate chapter. The unreliable narrator phenomenon in transgressive fiction is not an uncommon occurrence, as several stories that could be considered transgressive employ the same technique, for example, Poprishchin in Nikolai Gogol's short story "Diary of a Madman" (1835) or Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955). These two protagonists, including the narrator of *Fight Club*, share a similar descent into paranoia and a distorted sense of reality: "If she means my boss, I say, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, I know, the police know, everyone's looking for me to lethally inject me, already, but it was Tyler who killed my boss. Tyler and I just happen to have the same fingerprints, but no one understands." (FC:

195) This part of the story is a great example of the unreliable narrator phenomenon as represented in *Fight Club*. The narrator claims to like his boss, unlike his alter ego, Tyler Durden, who seems to despise the man. Tyler possibly sees the boss as a representation of his (and by extension, the narrator's) repressive consumerist lifestyle. His disdain for the man is enough for Tyler to murder him, of which the narrator has no recollection. The murder of his boss also represents a turning point for the narrator, as Tyler's actions so far have been mischievous at most. At this point in the story, both the reader and the narrator begin to realise the threat that is Tyler Durden. The unreliable narrator device is exceptionally interesting here, as both the reader and the narrator struggle with trusting the events leading up to this point:

#### Example 5

I pinch myself.  
 I ask Marla how we met.  
 "In that testicle cancer thing," Marla says. "Then you saved my life."  
 ...I ask Marla what my name is.  
 ...Marla says, "Tyler Durden. Your name is Tyler Butt-Wipe-for-Brains Durden..."  
 I've got to get some sleep... I've got to find Tyler. (FC: 160)

Without the presence of the narrator's love interest, Marla Singer, learning about Tyler's identity would have been a difficult task. The "Tyler side" of the narrator was the one having a sexual relationship with Marla, while the narrator as himself would be the one interacting with her outside of sex. Naturally, this arrangement becomes complicated soon enough, as the narrator begins to grow emotionally attached to Marla, while, to the narrator's knowledge, she is having an intimate relationship with his friend.

Visoi's (2014: 127) analysis of the transgression in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* bears similarities with *Fight Club*. In both of the novels, the narrator can be considered unreliable:

In Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, the obvious disruption of the story through constant back and forth movement between narrative levels and insertion of genres clearly shows how reading and interpretation can become blurred. The readers' view of adultery as transgression in the textual world of *The Lover* is modified by the narrator who suppresses certain evidence and instead allows several layers of her story to unfold in the end.

The narrator in *Fight Club*, however, does not suppress the evidence that Tyler Durden and the narrator is the same person. As the narrator's transgression is his own dissociative identity disorder, he is not aware of Tyler's true identity until later in the story. Through convincing the reader of a linear story and the existence of two entirely different characters within the narrative (the narrator and Tyler Durden), the reader is inclined to sympathize with the narrator as the victim of a strange set of circumstances, rather than, for example, a murderer of his boss. In fact, the narrator manifests the same degree of trepidation and uncertainty about the events that have taken place, and together with the reader, start piecing the puzzle together. In a sense, the unreliable narrator is "seeking reliability" in trying to figure out the double life he has supposedly been living.

Now that the existence of the unreliable narrator has been established, we may begin to analyse the significance of the reader deception device that is deployed by Palahniuk in the novel. According to Mieke Bal (1997: 19), evaluating the role of a character in a series of events can prove useful in providing information about the structure of the story and even how the characters can determine the outcome of the fabula<sup>2</sup>.

A character exhibits not only similarities to and differences from other characters. Often, there is a connection or a discrepancy between the character, its situation, and its environment. Finally, the description which has been obtained of a character can be contrasted with an analysis of the functions it performs in a series of events. . . What kinds of actions does a character perform, and what role does it

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<sup>2</sup> In this context, fabula is a traditional tale.

play in the fabula? This confrontation can yield information about the construction of the story with respect to the fabula. Because of a certain event, alterations may take place in the build-up of a character, and internal relations between the various characters change. Conversely, alterations in the make-up of a character may influence events and determine the outcome of the fabula.

As the narrator is “the most central concept in the analysis of narrative texts” (Bal 1997: 19), it is important to observe the narrator’s role in the story in terms of transgression. As such, Tyler Durden’s appearance in the story and the interactions with the narrator are crucial in shaping the plot and how the narrator interacts with other characters (e.g. Marla Singer).

Additionally, the narrator’s growing suspicions of the identity of Tyler Durden leads to him being institutionalized at the end of the story, while the “ghost of Tyler Durden” still follows him, as some of the medical workers are hinting to be members of Project Mayhem. The character interactions and the plot rely heavily on successfully deceiving the reader to believe the reality that the narrator believes.

Very early on in the novel, before the narrator’s suspicions begin to arise regarding the identity of Tyler Durden, he makes an interesting remark: “Tyler and Marla are never in the same room. I never see them together. Still, you never see me and Zsa Zsa Gabor together, and this doesn’t mean we’re the same person.” (FC: 65) This could be a highly ironic method of foreboding by the author and/or a hint regarding the narrator’s complete lack of objectivity, which is a part of the unreliable narrator technique of fooling the readers. In the current example, the reader has no reason to doubt the thoughts of the narrator, thus, the irony of the thought remains lost until the second read.



### 6.3. Nonlinearity and Chaos Theory in *Fight Club*

Nonlinearity is one of the most common characteristics of transgressive novels dealing with mental illness or trauma. Sartain (2005: 36) discusses the issue of time in *Fight Club* as such: "Non-linear dynamics, popularly known as chaos theory, receives ample discussion in *Fight Club*, although like all other concepts from the contemporary science, it is not dealt with directly as a concept; rather, it is represented and metaphorized through characters and events." As such, the non-linearity or chaos theory should be analysed as an abstract phenomenon that could be applied to the narrative in *Fight Club*, which is the angle this current study utilises.

In his analysis of applied chaos theory, Ali Bulent Cambel (1993: 15) suggests that chaos as the opposite of order is usually considered a negative thing by the public, but it is valuable in science: "Usually, in our daily conversations we condemn chaos as some sort of confusion or disorganization. Scientifically, we look at it quite differently. Chaos implies the existence of unpredictable or random aspects of dynamic matters, but it is not necessarily bad or undesirable – sometimes quite the contrary," and quotes Henry Adams: "Chaos often breeds life, when order breeds habit", since equilibrium is not always desirable. The importance of chaos is apparent as much in literature as it is in science. *Fight Club* is, in its essence, the narrator's escape from Adams' equilibrium. We are introduced to the narrator's perfect and cosy life among Ikea furniture, but it is clearly causing misery for the protagonist:

#### Example 6

The phone rang in Tyler's rented house on Paper Street.  
Oh Tyler, please deliver me.  
And the phone rang.

The doorman leaned into my shoulder and said, "A lot of young people don't know what they really want."  
 Oh, Tyler, please rescue me.  
 And the phone rang.  
 "Young people, they think they want the whole world."  
 Deliver me from Swedish furniture.  
 Deliver me from clever art. (FC: 46)

In Tyler Durden's perspective, chaos is the perfect state of being, as his mantra of spiritual elevation through destruction (xx) is repeated throughout the novel in many ways. The narrator's comfortable life could be considered as the equilibrium which he finds no escape from on his own, only with the help of Tyler can the monotony of his life be broken. Tyler expresses his desire to destroy the old to create something better (FC: 125) and shows his disdain for classical works of art (FC: 141). This is a part of Tyler's quest for chaos, he believes humanity should stop clinging to old values, as they hold us back from achieving our true potential as "God's unwanted children", much like the narrator's need to hold on to his "Ikea lifestyle" prevents him from embracing the chaotic nature of life, which is introduced to him through Tyler. Tyler's teachings of achieving spiritual elevation resemble Sartre's (1946: 11) lecture on existentialism as humanism: "...he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realization, that man can realize himself as truly human."

Sartain (2005: 42) suggests that both Tyler Durden and Joe's<sup>3</sup> actions became increasingly chaotic over time: "After participating in Fight Club, Joe comes to the lifechanging realization that entropy and chaos are the dominant forces in the universe, and to fight against them is ultimately a doomed endeavor." This claim is supported in multiple ways within the novel, for example, after the narrator beats up a particularly beautiful member of the

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<sup>3</sup> Sartain uses the name Joe for the unnamed narrator in *Fight Club*. He is sometimes also referred to as Jack.

fight club named Angel Face, he states that he is in the mood to “destroy something beautiful” (FC: 122) This is particular moment in the novel is also when fight club became Project Mayhem, a simple fighting ring turned into “organised chaos”, the “Bureaucracy of Anarchy” (FC: 119), as the narrator puts it. Tyler embraces the chaos that Cambel describes as an undesirable state of being by most people’s standards, he accepts the importance of violence and death as a part of the human experience, as ignoring or fighting it would be futile.

Considering that the narrator’s thoughts and actions become increasingly similar to Tyler’s, this could also signify an inner power struggle, where Tyler’s interactions with the narrator are attempts to assimilate and eradicate Joe, as Tyler describes himself as being free while the narrator is not (FC: 174). The narrator, however, rebels against Tyler’s plan of detonating the city’s financial district and thus, rejects his chaotic view of the world. However, by the end it is clear that the narrator’s nemesis still resides within himself, regardless if he accepts Tyler’s destructive attitude.

The non-linearity concept of the novel is deeply entwined with “the unreliable narrator” discussed in the previous subchapter. Jumps in time tend to be common with characters struggling with madness and their perception of reality, as the timeline can be convoluted and the protagonist often has trouble remembering his actions. Particularly, in the case of *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden “takes over” the narrator’s actions while he sleeps, making it difficult to remember what he did the night before.

#### Example 7

But we fought, I say. The night we invented fight club.  
 “You weren’t really fighting me,” Tyler says. “You said so yourself.  
 You were fighting everything you hate in your life.”  
 But I can see you.  
 “You’re asleep.”

But you're renting a house. You held a job. Two jobs.  
 Tyler says, "Order your canceled checks from the bank. I rented the house in your name. I think you'll find the handwriting on the rent checks matches the notes you've been typing for me." (FC:167)

The events that could be mistaken as the backstory of Tyler Durden as separate character are actually taking place while the narrator is asleep, creating a half-truth where the narrator as Tyler held night jobs and organized the activity of Project Mayhem unbeknownst to the narrator himself. This explains the narrator's steadily deteriorating mental health, as Tyler's nightly takeovers would reduce the narrator's sleeping time to almost non-existent, allowing the negative effects of a lack of sleep to pile up over time. This is the catalyst of the narrator's spiral into madness, which also explains the non-linearity aspect of the novel – the narrator is the reader's way of learning about the events of *Fight Club*, but if the narrator's mind is ill, incomplete memories and time jumps will inevitably occur throughout the narrative.

The nonlinearity aspect is relatively common in transgressive literature. For example, in *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut (1969), the protagonist in the novel begins to experience flashbacks due to the horrors he experienced during the war. These flashbacks occur randomly and the protagonist's sense of reality becomes increasingly unstable and these flashbacks play a role in propelling the character's actions, much like in *Fight Club*, where the narrator's sense of reality is put to test as he finally figures out the identity of Tyler Durden due to the inconsistencies between his version of events and how he is treated by the characters around him.

Palahniuk offers a different perspective on chaos as something one should embrace rather than reject or fear. While it is true that the narrator's journey ends in a mental hospital, the basic notion of chaos is expressed as something inherent to all life:

Chaos and entropy are the overarching themes of Palahniuk's novels, but they are presented in a way that is counter-intuitive for contemporary culture. Instead of viewing chaos and entropy as something bad that should be avoided at all costs, they are the fundamental forces at work in the world, and Palahniuk advises that one should get used to them, or insanity might follow because of the futile fight against the underlying chaotic forces of nature. (Sartain 2009: 43)

The narrator's life before "meeting" Tyler revolved around avoiding said "chaos" in a routine and comfortable life. This is reflected in his need for "clever art" or matching Swedish furniture for his stylish apartment – the importance of appearance outweighed practicality or price. After spending more time around Tyler, his nihilistic and simple approach towards life begins to rub off on the narrator, who, starts to not only embrace chaos, but act in a chaotic manner, which is especially apparent in the interactions between the narrator and his boss.

#### Example 8

Go ahead, I say, read some more.  
 No really, I say, it sounds fascinating. The work of a totally diseased mind.  
 ...My boss just looks at me...  
 ...Maybe, I say, this diseased fuck would use an Eagle Apache carbine because an Apache takes a thirty-shot mag and only weighs nine pounds. The Armalite only takes a five round magazine. With thirty shots, our totally fucked hero could go the length of mahogany row and take out every vice-president with a cartridge left over for each director.  
 Tyler's words coming out of my mouth. I used to be such a nice person. (FC: 99)

As the last sentence reveals, Tyler is in control of the narrator while this specific sequence is taking place. The more "out of control" the narrator's life is, the more "in control" Tyler is. Sartain (2005: 32) suggests that the reason behind the chaotic behaviour of the men lies in understanding entropy: "many of the seemingly random transgressive acts perpetrated by the characters in Palahniuk's fiction fall within an understanding of entropy as a

force for renewal and meaning." In Sartain's analysis, Tyler and "Joe" are both the opposite ends of entropy. In primary school physics, students are taught a part of thermodynamics, which states that a closed system will always attempt to achieve entropy – the "middle ground" between two opposite spectrums, for example, ice dropped into equal amount of hot water will turn it lukewarm as a part its attempt to reach entropy. Sartain discusses a possibility that the narrator and Tyler are both the opposite end of this spectrum: Tyler as the highly chaotic, unorganized and unlawful state of being and the narrator as the orderly, low entropic state (34). Therein lies a paradox, according to Sartain, as Tyler is not a separate person but an extension of the narrator's personality, both of them are simultaneously chaotic and orderly, good and evil, entropic and negentropic, all at once (2005: 35-6).

As a result, conflict arises when one or the other attempts control. The narrator, after learning about Tyler Durden's identity and activities, will reject his plans to attack the city's financial district. Tyler, however, threatens the narrator with violence if he attempts to interfere with his activities: "I'll still live my life while you're asleep, but if you fuck with me, if you chain yourself to the bed at night or take big doses of sleeping pills, then we'll be enemies. And I'll get you for it" (*FC*: 168). Thus, no "entropy" can be achieved after this point and this creates conflict between the two sides of the narrator.

Ultimately, there is no "good" or "bad" in *Fight Club*. Tyler Durden and "Joe" are the two sides of the same coin, representing the entropy that governs our life. While it is true that the events of the novel are largely chaotic in nature, the "balance is restored" in the end when the narrator is in a mental hospital, believing that he is speaking with God (*FC*: 207). The issue of time in the narrative is connected to chaos and transgression, as the narrator's incomplete memory is purely due to his dissociative identity disorder manifesting during his sleep.

## 7 THE LANGUAGE OF TRANSGRESSION

As the use of language in the analysis of transgression is not commonly discussed, I will attempt to research it in an in-depth manner, as I attempt to prove that transgression is also expressed through the writing style of the narrator, thus, making it a valuable addition to the study. The aspects I will discuss are minimalism and repetition as a part of a transgressive image Palahniuk is attempting to portray in *Fight Club*. By the end of the book, the reader is introduced to the fact that Tyler and narrator is the same person. This effectively means that a large part of the story, including the dialogue between Tyler and the narrator, occurred in the mind of the unnamed narrator. The analysis of transgression in *Fight Club* is largely connected to the mental illness of the narrator, which means that looking at the linguistic choices of Palahniuk may be of significant value to the analysis of transgression in *Fight Club* as a whole.

### 7.1. Minimalism

*Eschew surplusage.* – Mark Twain

Transgression and language is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that can be analysed in multiple ways in the novel. One form of expressing the act of transgression is how the characters explicitly act and interact with the world around them. In *Fight Club*, transgression is expressed by the mental illness of the narrator and the events that transpire because of it. The minimalist style serves transgression, as it appears to reflect the narrator's slipping sense of reality -- the sentences are very short, often containing just one word and strange connections that on initial observation do not make sense or connect to the idea the narrator was trying to convey. This type of

“sparing” use of language is referred to as the “minimalist style”.

Palahniuk’s minimalist influences are certainly prominent in *Fight Club*, providing much to be discussed in terms of transgression in the minimalist language. In this subchapter, I will analyse the significance of minimalism in *Fight Club* and its relation to transgression.

According to Anne Goldstein and her analysis of minimalistic art, it “challenged prevailing aesthetic forms and served to propel a redefinition of the ‘object status’ of a work of art into conceptual terms as [artists] redefined the structure, form, material, and production of the art object, as well as its relationship to space, other objects, and the spectator” (17–18). Leaving aside linguistic technicalities of defining the “minimal”, the common mantra of minimalism used in writing is “less is more” and this mentality has persisted through history with slogans, proverbs and quips that can all be classified as minimalist in structure (Barth 1986). When it comes to literature, minimalism is generally considered as a “bare minimum” style of writing, expressing oneself through limited means. Barth (1986) discusses the cyclic nature of the maximalist and minimalist trend, claiming that the recent times have seen the rise of minimalism due to readers’ lower attention spans:

Among the great minimalist writers, this impoverishment is elected and strategic: simplification in the interest of strength, or of some other value. Among the less great it may be *faute de mieux*. Among today's "common readers" it is pandemic. Along with this decline, an ever-dwindling readerly attention span. The long popular novel still has its devotees, especially aboard large airplanes and on beaches; but it can scarcely be doubted that many of the hours we bourgeois now spend with our televisions and video cassette recorders, and in our cars and at the movies, we used to spend reading novels and novellas and not-so-short stories.

While it is true that the modern life has become fast-paced, the minimalism in the context of transgression serves a deeper purpose than providing a compact and easy-to-read story for the readers.



Due to the limited scope of the current thesis, I have decided to present the ideas of Boeckx (2006) and his work *Linguistic Minimalism* as a theoretical basis to analyse the minimalist style in *Fight Club*. The academic discourse regarding minimalism is a controversial one. In order to analyse the minimalist aspect of language, one must first establish a unifying “faculty of language”, as Boeckx (2006:2) puts it. However, up to this point, researchers have all but agreed on what exactly this unifying faculty should contain. Boeckx’s works discuss the most influential theories regarding literary minimalism, which is why I have decided to use his work as theory for the current study. According to Boeckx, there is still a general consensus on what the faculty of language should contain and it is referred to as the standard model (2006: 3). This is essentially one view of many in terms of what sort of grammar rules the faculty of language should contain. Boeckx offers Government-Binding theory (GB) as a starting point to analysing minimalism, which is also useful for the current study, as it is highly *modular* (ibid 62), offering sub-theories for the intricacies of structures each language may have. Inevitably, some generalisations need to be made in order to introduce minimalism in a concise manner – the “big facts” of working with UG<sup>4</sup>, as Boeckx (66) describes it.

Thus, Boeckx’s defines the three of the most important characteristics of a text for it to be considered minimalist: economy, virtual conceptual necessity and symmetry. Those make up the “legs of the tripod” of minimalism (ibid 83). These three aspects of minimalism are often linked to one another. Boeckx gives an interesting example of these three characteristics of minimalism occurring in text, beginning with symmetry:

Given that symmetry underlies the fact that *a* is identical to *b* under some operation *c*, the more symmetry one finds in a system (say,  $x = y$ ), the fewer devices will be needed to generate *x* and *y*, since  $x = y$ . In other words, the more symmetry one finds, the fewer distinct

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<sup>4</sup>Abbreviation for *Universal Grammar*.

processes one needs to generate a wide array of forms (i.e. the more economical the system is), and the greater the likelihood that the remaining processes follow from virtual conceptual necessity. (ibid 83)

To summarise even further, according to Chomsky (1951: 6), the economy of grammar implies the use of a sentence with the shortest derivation, whereas symmetry and the virtual conceptual necessity present the “optimal design”, which in minimalism constitutes the leaving out of elements in the order of lowest conceptual importance (Boeckx 82). Let us examine an excerpt from *Fight Club* in light of this “tripod” of minimalism that Boeckx has offered:

### Example 9

Tufts of hair surface beside the dirt clods. Hair and shit. Bone meal and blood meal. The plants are growing faster than the space monkeys can grow them back. (135)

This section illustrates a very common occurrence in the novel, where Palahniuk creates new sentences instead of a list within one sentence. I will offer two different ways in which this excerpt can be reconstructed:

### Example 9.1

Tufts of hair (, shit, bone meal and blood meal) surface beside the dirt clods.

The purpose of this particular method of writing is to create emphasis on the utterances that are “sectioned off” as separate sentences, also referred to as *ploce*. Example 1.1 retains the economy of the original text, but the conceptual necessity has changed along with the impact of the utterance.

### Example 9.2

Tufts of hair surface beside the dirt clods. (There was) hair shit.  
 (There was) bone meal and blood meal.

The conceptual necessity and impact remains the same as the original excerpt, but the economy is greatly affected by the inclusion of a double “there are” due to the fact that the utterances are written as separate sentences, creating a clumsy and inelegant structure. After reconstructing Palahniuk’s minimal structure, the reason why the original is the linguistically preferred choice is clear: emphasis and simplicity, or “optimal” design, according to Boeckx (82).

Writing in short and simple sentences is overall a common technique used in transgressive fiction, which also applies to the subject of the current analysis – *Fight Club*. As the mental state of the narrator deteriorates over the course of the novel, short and often nonsensical sentences become more and more commonly used, blurring the lines between “fact” and “fiction” from the standpoint of the events of the novel. As a result, there is a variety of examples of the use of a minimal style provided in the book. For example, in *Fight Club*, in certain places of the novel, the minimalist style is used when distinguishing between the multiple personalities of the narrator, which is especially evident during the ending events that lead to the “death” of Tyler Durden:

### Example 10

“In my father’s house are many mansions.  
 Of course, when I pulled the trigger, I died.  
 Liar.  
 And Tyler died.  
 ...Everything in heaven is white on white.  
 Faker.  
 Everything in heaven is quiet, rubber-soled shoes.  
 I can sleep in heaven.” (FC: 206)

This sequence is a dialogue with his “other side” that is taking place inside the narrator’s head. When analysing the sentences in this particular excerpt, a conservative style of writing is evident. The “liar” and “faker” utterances are not accompanied by a traditional sentence structures (in the case of this example, missing Subject and Verb), but this serves to present a linguistic supplement along with the meaning that is conveyed in this monologue – the fractured state of mind of the narrator. As mentioned earlier, this type of shortening of sentences to mere phrases and words is abundant throughout the novel and it is particularly prevalent as the novel progresses along with the narrator’s mental illness. The “liar” and “faker” represent Tyler’s lingering influence over the narrator after he is institutionalised for the crimes he committed while acting as Tyler Durden.

As mentioned earlier, minimalism aids the perception of insanity but it is clearly very dependent of reader knowledge. Without the final twist of Tyler Durden and narrator being one, Tyler would be a friend turned foe and not much in the way of writing style would convince the reader otherwise. It is only after another read we may start to analyse the language of the narrator as more than what meets the eye. Additionally, the minimalist style is also connected to *ploce*, meaning that Palahniuk creates emphasis by using single nouns or multiple nouns as separate sentences in order to raise the impact of said nouns. Even Palahniuk (2004) himself has admitted his love for minimalism in numerous occasions: “Hempel shows how a story doesn’t have to be some constant stream of blah-blah-blah to bully the reader into paying attention... Instead, story can be a succession of tasty, smelly, touchable details. What Tom Spanbauer and Gordon Lish call “going on the body,” to give the reader a sympathetic physical reaction, to involve the reader on a gut level.” (145). Therefore, minimalism cannot be ignored as a point of discussion regarding transgression in *Fight Club*.

The aspect of minimalism in *Fight Club* is fascinating and would serve well for dedicated research on the matter. The ways in which minimalism could be theorised are plentiful and Boeckx offers concise insight into most of the prevalent theories so far. However, as this current study deals with transgression in a broad manner, the dissection of minimalism will remain somewhat superficial and merely serves as an example of the language of transgression. As Guglielmo Cinque (2002: 193) points out, minimalism is a very demanding approach as it requires doing descriptive and theoretical work at the same time. Minimalism in *Fight Club* offers much to analyse, therefore it could be an interesting topic for further studies.

## 7.2. Repetition

Another aspect that commonly appears in transgressive works of fiction is repetition. Similarly to minimalism, repetition is a vast area of linguistics that is difficult to cover in this master's thesis in an exhaustive manner.

Regardless, I will attempt to analyse the phenomenon in regards to *Fight Club*, as the language of transgression is an important angle in this study, and repetition is a substantial part of the language use in *Fight Club*.

Aitchison (1994: 18) describes the paradoxical nature of repetition, as it is widely used yet widely avoided in text. According to Hoey (1991: 35), repetition shows the relatedness of sentences in a text, in the same manner as bibliographical reference shows relatedness of academic papers. The "slow drip" of information through repetition can aid comprehension for the reader (Aitchison 1994: 20). One thing to keep in mind when analysing repetition, is the existence of intentional and unintentional repetition, with "covert controlled" repetition somewhere in between the two (ibid 21). This signifies the difference between repetition used consciously for a specific purpose and repetition that occurs in an automatic and unintentional way

(e.g. “drink the drink”, as drink refers to a noun and a verb). The difference between the two is apparent through context. The reason why these distinctions are important in this study, intentional repetition carries the most analytic value in terms of transgression research. The intentionally used repetition may offer some insight into why the narrator repeats utterances and what is the significance of repetition when it comes to transgressive elements of the story, for example, the narrator’s dissociative identity disorder.

Repetition is a very frequent occurrence in *Fight Club*. As mentioned earlier in the study, the purpose of this section is to connect repetition with transgression and offer some examples. Much like minimalism, repetition in *Fight Club* serves to show the reader the fragmented mind of the narrator even before the twist of the dissociative identity disorder is revealed at the end of the novel. As we have already established in the section dedicated to minimalism, repetition also serves as a tool of emphasis for the writer, as thoughts or words that are repeated in the text tend to gain impact in meaning (also known as *ploce*). Throughout the story, there is a wide array of examples of the narrator repeating himself, but I have decided to present a select few for analysis. The next excerpt is a long one but it is a good example of a typical occurrence of intentional repetition in the story.

#### Example 11

Prepare to evacuate soul in ten, in nine, eight.  
 Chloe’s splashing through the ankle-deep backup of renal fluid from  
 her failed kidneys.  
 Death will commence in *five*.  
*Five, four*.  
*Four*.  
 Around her, parasitic life spray paints her heart.  
*Four, three*.  
*Three, two*.  
 Chloe climbs hand-over-hand up the curdled lining of her own  
 throat.

Death to commence in *three, in two*.  
 Moonlight shines in through the open mouth.  
 Prepare for the last breath, *now*.  
 Evacuate.  
*Now*.  
 Soul clear of body.  
*Now*.  
 Death commences.  
*Now*. (FC: 36-37)

Aitchison tries to distinguish between “good” and “bad” repetition, the latter is usually considered to be repetition that is impossible or nonsensical, consisting of the same words in short succession, much like the example above: “Sentences such as [this] are normally regarded as well-informed but unacceptable, since similarly formed sentences without the repeated verbs are possible.” (ibid 26) The above excerpt is an example of the narrator’s thoughts before he believes he will die. Mixed with a countdown to his demise is a macabre thought about a woman in his cancer support group, Chloe. The countdown woven into his thought about Chloe is repeated: “Prepare to evacuate soul in ten, in nine, eight. Death will commence in five. Five four. Four. Four three...” Instead of continuing the countdown, he repeats the numbers over and over again. The purpose of this repetition is, perhaps, to stall the narrator’s imminent death. Another explanation would be that the narrator has accepted his faith, but the death is not occurring. In either case, the repetition in the text reflects the narrator’s emotional struggle of coming to terms with dying.

It is worth noting that the rambling type of repetition never happens in the utterances spoken by Tyler Durden, his alter ego. This is due to the fact that Tyler is the antithesis of the narrator and thus, confident in his mannerisms. Another aspect worth mentioning along with the repetition is the appearance of very concise, short sentences, akin to notes one would make when in hurry. It is a rather important aspect in terms of storytelling. Much like repetition and minimalism, it is a subtle hint towards the idea that, along with the narrator’s thoughts, the conversations between the narrator and

Tyler Durden were taking place in the mind of the narrator all along. As the human mind tends to believe a writer when creating assumptions, also in the case of the identity of Tyler Durden, the linguistic hints may not be obvious on the first read of the novel.

According to Aitchison (30), this example of repetition could also be considered as intensification. In order to create tension in an exciting or dangerous event, Palahniuk repeats words to delay the “climax”. Another example of this comes from Tyler’s attempt to blackmail the police commissioner into allowing Project Mayhem to continue causing havoc in the city:

#### Example 12

The commissioner said, no.  
 And don’t.  
 Stop.  
 Please.  
 Oh.  
 God.  
 Help.  
 Me.  
 Help.  
 No.  
 Me.  
 God.  
 Me.  
 Stop.  
 Them. (FC: 165-6)

This moment is also very intimate in nature, as Tyler and his space monkeys prepare to cut the commissioner’s testicles off if he does not comply with their demands. The intensity of the altercation is portrayed through these partly repeated one-word sentences, keeping the reader in suspense as a result. It is worth noting that both of these examples occur in the second half of the novel when Tyler’s presence in the narrator’s life becomes more and



more destructive. Here is another example of repetition that illustrates Tyler's hold on the narrator's mind:

### Example 13

"You can mix the nitroglycerin with sodium nitrate and sawdust to make dynamite," Tyler says.  
 The kiss shines wet on the back of my white hand.  
 Dynamite, I say, and sit back on my heels.  
 Tyler pries the lid off the can of lye. "You can blow up bridges," Tyler says.  
 "You can mix the nitroglycerin with more nitric acid and paraffin and make gelatin explosives," Tyler says.  
 "You could blow up a building, easy," Tyler says.  
 Tyler tilts the can of lye an inch above the shining wet kiss on the back of my hand.  
 "This is a chemical burn," Tyler says, "and it will hurt worse than you've ever been burned. Worse than a hundred cigarettes."  
 The kiss shines on the back of my hand.  
 "You'll have a scar," Tyler says.  
 "With enough soap," Tyler says, "you could blow up the whole world. Now remember your promise."  
 And Tyler pours the lye. (FC: 73)

Menn and MacWhinney (1984: 519) discuss how the accidental duplication of morphemes is avoided in language, yet some languages use the "strategy of reduplication" where materials are deliberately repeated for a certain effect. In the previous example, the frequency of the repetition of "Tyler says" shows that it is not coincidental or accidental in the passage, but serves a meaning of its own. Rather than combining Tyler's sentences into a longer piece of text, Palahniuk divides them into sentences as a deliberate attempt to use "Tyler says" at the end or middle of the sentences. The purpose of this repetition is not to alleviate reader confusion as to the identity of the person that uttered a specific sentence, but rather, the creation of emphasis and tension, due to the action that is taking place at the time (Tyler burns the narrator's hand), which is similar to the examples provided earlier.

As discussed in this section, repetition can be connected to transgression in various ways. It is mostly used by Palahniuk as a tool to create suspense in the novel in situations that could be considered transgressive, whether it is the narrator dealing with the acceptance of death or Tyler Durden trying to ensure the success of his “cult” of space monkeys by threatening to castrate the man in charge of the police force. Since the expression of transgression through language is unavoidable, it may prove to be valuable to analyse *Fight Club* even further from a linguistic standpoint. Both minimalism and repetition are used in the novel to portray the deteriorating mental health of the narrator, as the use of these linguistic devices becomes more frequent as the novel progresses.

## 8 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current study revolves around answering the research question I have stated in the beginning of the novel: how is transgression represented in *Fight Club*? As the research and examples provided in the current study have shown, transgression in *Fight Club* is a very multifaceted and complex phenomenon. The current research merely scraped the surface of the multitude of ways the novel has, and can be analysed as a piece of transgressive fiction. The motivation behind the choice of transgression and *Fight Club* was very much a personal one, as the genre itself is fascinating and analysing a novel that is important to me has motivated to rediscover *Fight Club* in a completely different angle, a realisation that I hope the readers of the current study will share by the end of this research.

This study of transgression in *Fight Club* aims to dissect the phenomenon in a deep manner, offering varied approaches to how transgression can be analysed. For the sake of clarity, I divided this analysis into three, involving the transgression in themes, narrative devices and language of *Fight Club*. Not only is transgression expressed explicitly through themes of violence and mental illness, but the narrative devices and Palahniuk's methods of writing reflect on the protagonist's increasingly fractured state of mind. As such, I have provided examples to illustrate the many ways this interesting genre can manifest in writing.

Regarding transgression as a narrative device, I discussed some of the most commonly researched devices in the transgressive fiction discourse – nonlinearity, the unreliable narrator and, additionally, stream of consciousness. Regarding language and transgression, minimalism and repetition were chosen as discussion points due to their frequent occurrence in the novel. Lastly, I discussed the topic of transgressive themes, which is

arguably the most fruitful source of discourse regarding transgression, particularly the themes of gender representation and consumerism. The analysis of each of these topics yielded similar results: a clear connection to the narrator's transgressions, which in the context of the novel can be considered as dissociative identity disorder and violence.

As Palahniuk's written works are relatively unknown in Finland, the current paper can be used as supplementary material in the classes of contemporary American literature in order to introduce his work within the discussion of postmodern fiction. It should be noted, however, that the study of the transgression in a work of fiction is an extensive one and cannot be exhausted within the current research, as the ways in which transgression can be represented and interpreted in *Fight Club* are plentiful. Considering transgressive fiction's recent surge in popularity, this study will benefit genre analysis, as it is an example of an in-depth analysis of a piece of transgressive fiction in a concise form. However, as stated earlier, this study is far from exhaustive and will benefit greatly from further research into the language aspect of transgressive writing.

The ambition of this thesis is also its weakness. If this study were extended, I would analyse each of the three main categories in even more depth. It became clear to me during my analysis that transgressive fiction, even as presented in a small novel such as *Fight Club*, is an incredibly intricate genre and would benefit greatly from an in-depth analysis of any of the three aspects I have presented. Particularly, I would theorise further about transgressive language, as this is arguably the least discussed dimension of transgressive writing but it holds great potential as method to further analyse how an author creates meaning in transgressive fiction. As such, the presented topics remain somewhat shallower than I hoped, but at the same time, serve as a reminder to myself of the great potential that the analysis of transgression still holds, especially in the works of Chuck Palahniuk, and

this thesis is merely a stepping stone towards understanding this fascinating and complex genre.

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