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Violence and Self-destruction in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and Bret Ellis' *American Psycho*

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Abstract:

The present study is an analytical reading of violence as a key feature of postmodernism in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) and Bret Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991). Based on Eagleton's idea of the tragic and the notion of sweet violence, the study aims to explore how violence functions as a response to consumer culture, capitalism, and how it leads to human alienation and self-destruction in the hyper-real postmodern world of the selected novels. Themes of violence, capitalism and consumerism are well-depicted in the works of Palahniuk and Ellis as they are concerned with the life of man in the second half of the twentieth century and seek to portray a realistic representation of American society where man is alienated from himself and tries in vain to find meaning in such a community.

Keywords: *Fight Club*, *American Psycho*, violence, self-destruction, capitalism.

Introduction

Today's western world is often characterized as being increasingly violent and there is no doubt that its popular culture is violent. There is violence in the movies, literature and video games. Violence is a representation of class conflicts in society. The heroes and heroines that a society chooses to make popular at any one point in its history are those figures which are representative of its dominant values. The themes of class struggle, anti-consumerism, alienation, and violence are prevalent in postmodern literature. Philosophically, violence has nearly always been interchangeably linked to tragedy which often leads to violence, and violence is in most ways considered a way of terrorizing someone or something. Many great thinkers of the

contemporary world have argued about violence and its nature, as well as its effects on people's everyday life.

Žižek's book [Violence (2008)] is fundamentally about understanding violence and the way it is represented in global society, especially in relation to economic interests. He draws a distinction between what he calls *subjective* violence and *objective* violence. Subjective violence refers to violence that is inflicted by a clearly identifiable agent of action, as in the case of criminal activity or terrorism. Objective violence, on the other hand, has no clear perpetrator and is often overlooked in the background of subjective violence outbreaks. For example, the objective violence of global poverty cannot be blamed on any one entity and, even if financial elites were to be identified as culpable, they could still be exonerated by their subjugation to a system of capitalist finance that makes the rise of an elite financial class inevitable. (Weiss)

Zizek believes that objective violence "may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be irrational explosions of subjective violence" (10). In other words, he points to some objective social structures that generate subjective violent acts and also holds that recognizing these underlying social factors enables us to grasp the nature of ongoing violent manifestations. He adopts a rather neutral attitude towards the issue and avoids confronting it directly: "My underlying premise is that there is something inherently mystifying in a direct confrontation with it: the overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking" (Zizek 12).

From a rather different perspective, in his seminal work, *Holy Terror* (2005), Eagleton looks at violence not as a problem in society but as an ongoing fact that is there in cultures, and instead of unfruitful attempts at finding roots of violence, he tries to provide a detailed descriptive analysis of its nature and function in the social arena. "The problem of the violence of middle-class society is not simply a question of its origins: it lives on within it in the form of competition, exploitation, military conquest, and disruptive individualism" (70). In fact, Eagleton believes that violence is not something that belongs to the past and the barbaric life, but something that appears in different levels and different forms.

In *Sweet Violence: the Idea of the Tragic* (2002), Eagleton analyzes the conception of violence and the idea of tragic in postmodern literature and tries to reinterpret, rather than change, the idea of tragedy in the contemporary literary world. The book is indeed an ambitious yet ambiguous account of the idea of tragic violence as a synthesis of political, psychological, social and philosophical factors that reinforce, foster or initiate violence in different levels. He provides a political and social, rather than historical, representation of tragic violence and how it relates to postmodern life. His theory is a dynamic analysis of the condition of contemporary life that is characterized by rapid and swift changes in all human-related phenomena.

Eagleton looks at protagonists in postmodern fictions as heroes that rebel against both themselves and the society. They struggle between idealism and worldliness and cannot make a bridge between what they dream of becoming in the world and what the degraded world drives them to be. It is this split between the ideal and the real that gives rise to violence in the postmodern fiction. For protagonists of postmodern novels, the conflict between pragmatism and idealism is a tragic clash that mostly leads to the death of the major characters that are victims to violence and also contribute to sustaining violence. A major part of Eagleton's analysis of violence in postmodern novels is that most of the characters are disenchanting with politics of life and resort to violence and self-denial in reaction to social norms that are beyond their control.

Eagleton suggests that postmodern heroes are not those who are incapacitated victims of wars or other forms of coercive forces. Rather, Eagleton suggests that postmodern heroes are those who act out violence by their own consent in order to resist or overturn it. Elsewhere, in *Holy Terror*, he argues that "violence is not what governs human affairs, meaning perhaps that there is no enduring social order which does not rest on consent. Even the exercise of force must be backed in the end by general agreement. If you greet the violence of others simply with red-necked repression, you are likely to have your buildings blown to pieces" (7). This simply means that in order for a hero in postmodern novel to be able to do something against what sees as flawed reality, he has to first accept violence by his own consent. Then, he turns to escape the violence by being violent himself because he can project it out to others and save himself: "Instead of directing that lethal violence upon ourselves, we turn it outwards, and in this way escape being torn apart by it. In deflecting this perilous power outwards, we press it into the service of humanity" (120).

In fact, what Eagleton is trying to suggest is that these heroes conceive violence as a universal condition of life, not only their own, and believe that if something is in principle meaningless and violent to them, it is surely the same for all mankind in general. "The poststructuralist critique of the proper is out to show that what appears tragic for bourgeois humanism – alienation, appropriation, reification and the like – is actually comic, always-already at work, part of the very conditions of our sociality" (199). This means that tragic violence in the form of a heroic death is not a matter of crisis and is not necessarily supposed to settle and reconstitute a meaningful identity to the hero or people in general. In this view, death is a response to wider and rather bigger scale violence and stems from positive sense of human destructiveness to deconstruct social and political hegemony.

There are surely a considerable number of postmodern fictions where violence, destruction, despair, and tragedy are fully depicted. However, some render it masterfully and contribute significantly to our understanding of the nature of violence in postmodern fiction. Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 debut novel *Fight Club* is clearly about a protagonist with multiple personality disorder who relies on violence and anarchy to fight the consumer culture in America. From the very beginning, his disillusionment with the capitalist system becomes ostensibly clear as he tries to overturn the social structure by turning to violence and anarchy.

Similarly, Bret Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) is in many ways a manifestation of how violence evolves in American upper class communities and diverges from the traditional realism to depict a hyperreal world where humanity and moral values are degraded. Ellis challenges the psychology and manners of the upper class characterized with too strict materialistic worldview that values solely possession and the power to purchase, and the ability to assert one's power over the others.

Discussion

Fight Club

Narrated in a first-person, stream-of-consciousness manner, *Fight Club* narrates misadventures of a thirty-year-old young man suffering from a sort of psychological problem who is dissatisfied with his job and self-confessed enslavement to consumerism. The narrator, as the protagonist of the novel, suffers mainly from insomnia and a personal sense of despair so great that he always yearns for a plane crash to end his meaningless existence. On the other hand, *Fight Club* is a story about men who are alienated from society and find salvation in fighting other guys. The novel is about the psychological development of the narrator and his alter ego, Tyler Durden, who had no father to help him make sense of the postmodern world and contributes to his own self-destruction.

Lars Bernaerts argues in "Fight Club and the Embedding of Delirium in Narrative" that delirium and violence are two key components of *Fight Club*. Bernaerts argues that the anonymous narrator suffers from dual personality where his projected alter ego, Tyler Durden, turns against him and makes him do violence acts. In fact, Bernaerts believes that the story is split between two acting subjects who struggle to gain control over the other. In simple words, Tyler is the narrator's shadow and represents his power and destructiveness, his suppressed anger and violence that can now show itself in the form of a desire to hurt and to be hurt. Bernaerts states that the relationship between Tyler and the narrator embodies a significant aspect of postmodern fiction in its engagement with delirium and reality. Tyler is born into the narrator as a result of some social processes of consumerism and alienation because the narrator fails to comply with new postmodern lifestyle and feels defeated. Therefore, Tyler is the natural child of this delusive world where the narrator feels unfitted. When the narrator fully recognizes the existence of Tyler and his great hold over him, he tries to get rid of him but is unable to. The relationship between the two is characterized with violence and dissatisfaction with ongoing world order. At the moment of narrator's full recognition of Tyler and his identity, a peculiar conversation between the two main characters becomes really riveting as Tyler shows how strong he is against the narrator:

So, now I know about Tyler, will he just disappear?

No, Tyler says, still holding my hand, I wouldn't be here in the first place if you didn't want me. 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.

Oh, this is bullshit. This is a dream. Tyler is a projection. He's a disassociative personality disorder. A psychogenic fugue state. Tyler Durden is my hallucination.

Fuck that shit, Tyler says. Maybe you're my schizophrenic hallucination.

(Palahniuk 124)

The author shows in this conversation how Tyler, as the narrator's shadow of desire for violence, penetrates into his character and makes him miserable. The narrator is the figure of sympathy as well as disgust for the reader because he is helpless against Tyler, but, on the other hand, he is pathetically bound to his unknown desire to hurt himself and others. In simple words, self-destruction in the novel means reconfiguration of personal identity. The narrator says, "At the time, my life just seemed too complete, and maybe we have to break everything to make something better out of ourselves" (Palahniuk36). This is an indication of the idea of sweet violence in the novel as the people in the story look at fighting as a form of catharsis where they cleanse themselves off any identity and redefine themselves by projecting their anger on others.

Olivia Burgess argues in "Revolutionary Bodies in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*" that violence is practiced by the individuals in the novel to liberate the American society from terror and enslavement to capitalist communal norms. "We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives. We have a spiritual depression. We have to show these men and women freedom by enslaving them, and show them courage by frightening them" (Palahniuk110). Project Mayhem is a plan directed toward enforcing a revolutionary ideology on the world that changes economic injustice but creates the very type of oppressive system it attempts to overthrow (Burgess 7-9).

Almost everything Tyler suggests to the narrator is, one way or another, related to acts of violence or sabotage that show his inner evil and his malicious intentions, though he may not in practice act them out. In most of the cases, this violence is an opposition to capitalist society. Tyler says that the club is a movement for the good of the poor: "Imagine, when we call a strike and everyone refuses to work until we redistribute the wealth of the world" (Palahniuk 110). Tyler represents the narrator's projected violence and the sort of violence propagated by him finally traps him as fight club turns out to be the cause of his problems. Tyler grows uncontrollable and the narrator does not have any holds over him. Then, the narrator feels somehow betrayed and defeated because his loved fight club is now a force against him. He regrets its being overthrown: "How everything you ever love will reject you or die. Everything you ever create will be thrown away. Everything you're proud of will end up as trash" (Palahniuk 150). The narrator's crave for death is interesting here as he finds it the only way to evade fight club and its gripping hold over his sad life. However, Tyler wants him to have a

glorious death just like the one Eagleton theorizes about heroes in postmodern fiction. Tyler talks to the narrator about his death and says that his death is not a little tragedy but a big event, "The last thing we have to do is your martyrdom thing. Your big death thing. Not like death as a sad, downer thing, this was going to be death as a cheery, empowering thing. A real opera of a death, that's what you're going to get" (Palahniuk151). Tyler is the narrator's hallucination and his inner tendency to do violent things and destroy things. Finally, the narrator kills himself to get rid of Tyler. In an interesting and unforgettable episode, the narrator gives a riveting speech about his existential philosophy of life and his strive for the betterment of a life that he finds insufficient for his violent soul. He challenges the existence of God, love, and peace:

I've met God across his long walnut desk with his diplomas hanging on the wall behind him, and God asks me, Why? Why did I cause so much pain? Didn't I realize that each of us is a sacred, unique snowflake of special unique specialness? Can't I see how we're all manifestations of love? I look at God behind his desk, taking notes on a pad, but God's got this all wrong. We are not special. We are not crap or trash, either. We just are. We just are, and what happens just happens. (Palahniuk155)

American Psycho

Undoubtedly, violence is the central theme in *American Psycho* as the main character engages in a series of seemingly sadistic and aggressive acts that bring about disastrous consequences. When he commits a seriously violent act he does not feel like doing something wrong and enjoys himself doing that. The narrator writes, "When I get stressed I get violent and take it out on myself. I've pulled razor blades on myself but then realized that having a scar is more detrimental than not having a stereo. I'd rather kick my stereo in than go punch somebody in the face". In situations where Bateman gets violent, he has no control over his consciousness and loses his sense of being a human. As Kent Hytten argues in "A Critical Reading of Commodity Aesthetics, Decadence and Violence in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*", Bateman feels like having no human sense and expects the tears of his victims to arise in him a lost sense of humanity: "Bateman does not have any moral restraints, which in turn allows him to see nothing wrong with violence, or at least, him using violence. As we can see from the prior quote, he sees himself as some kind of predator, who toys with his victim before bounding towards it, seizing it" (Hytten 20).

The narrator gradually discloses Bateman's development into madness and his excessive obsession with taking people's lives for no subtle reason. The first spark of violence in Bateman is his strong but short desire to kill McDermott as he feels a sort of contempt towards him:

I have a knife with a serrated blade in the pocket of my Valentino jacket and I'm tempted to gut McDermott with it right here in the entranceway, maybe slice his face open, sever his spine; but Price finally waves us in and the temptation to kill McDermott is replaced by this strange anticipation to have a good time, drink some champagne, flirt with a

hardbody, find some blow, maybe even dance to some oldies or that new Janet Jackson song I like. (Ellis 38)

A significant aspect of the nature of violence in the novel is that committing violent acts is a sort of self-assertion and establishing his upper-class status. This is a way of asserting oneself as an individual by rebelling against the absurdity of the discourse of consumer capitalism that dominates the novel. In this sense, violence turns to a means by which the individual creates himself by destroying others. In *The Spaces of Violence*, James Giles, asserts that men in Elli's *American Psycho* are afraid of death and mostly engage themselves in consumer culture to forget the fact that death will haunt them one day. They gain their identity by consuming things and forget that they are consumed by that culture. However, apart from consumerism, Bateman resorts to violence to hide his fear of death. as a symptom of this fear, Patrick "tries to defeat death by killing women and the poor, by attempting to take control of death in order to manipulate it to his own ends. Such acts, rooted in a kind of absurdist existentialism, constitute his attempt to "protect himself from death by killing others" (Giles 169).

In fact, Bateman's murders contribute to establishing his individuality and his suppressed feelings. He himself knows that his sense of violence cannot be easily removed from him. During a dinner with his girlfriend, Evelyn, Bateman attempts to stop dating her because he admits that they are incompatible: "my need to engage in homicidal behavior on a massive scale cannot be, um, corrected. But I have no other way to express my blocked needs. I'm surprised at how emotional this admission makes me, and it wears me down; I feel-light headed" (Ellis 338).

Similarly, James Brusseau argues in "Baudrillardian Repetition in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*" that there is a close relationship between depiction of violence and development of violence in the main character of *American Psycho* because violence is connected to Bateman's development as a psycho. Thus, narrative structure of the novel that focuses on a series of hideous and disgusting acts of murder denotes the inner world of the character and his disturbed mind from different incomplete perspective that, put together, make up the puzzle of his insanity in killing people. It is noteworthy that the narrator reveals Bateman's dark side only after half of the story is narrated. Nevertheless, as the story proceeds, the novel grows more and more violent and depicts murders in details to give a first-hand analysis of Bateman's strong urge to kill (Brusseau 41-44).

In *American Psycho* Ellis criticizes consumerism and capitalism in American society. It is a masterful combination of violence, capitalism, consumer culture, and human aggressiveness depicted in the figure of a dandy young man who is overwhelmed in upper-class materialistic attitude towards life and people around him. Patrick Bateman develops from a typically self-conscious person to a wild and violent man that challenges the ethical structure of late twentieth American society and satirizes its failure to glorify human dignity.

Murphet states in *Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho: A Reader's Guide* that Bateman has “a general class violence towards everything that is not white, male and upper-middle class” (43). His victims are usually from lower class people who lie at the bottom of social hierarchy either because of their gender or economic status. In fact, Bateman looks at lower class people as commodities to be consumed. His need to consume goes beyond the ordinary desire to use daily products. As he grows more violent towards other people, he grows more voracious to kill and consume them. Bateman's need to consume has gone to the point at which he starts to consume humans, by the act of killing and raping them to satisfy his needs. As the culture of consumerism becomes more widespread in the society, Bateman's desire for more violence becomes even stronger and he turns to a sadistic man that seems to be unable to hold back his aggression. His bloodlust increases throughout the novel and his acts of violence and torture become more and more frequent and vividly explained.

Bateman's acts of violence upon the less fortunate are a representation of the brutal society he lives in. In a rich man's world where acquiring money, commodities, status and quenching one's desires is everything, the social underclass must pay the price. Bateman consumes his victims, as he consumes his commodities, in an attempt to quench his thirst for menace and chaos. Bateman is a cliché, an ironic character created by Ellis to portray the problems with a society focused completely on consumerism and social status, in which the ego is centered and solidarity forgotten. Ellis uses irony throughout the novel to portray the social injustices that capitalism creates in the city, whilst simultaneously ridiculing Bateman and people of his type, in order to show the violent and dehumanizing side of capitalism and consumerism.

Results

Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* is a postmodern novel within which violence is depicted as an inherent aspect of human nature and everyone is potentially susceptible to showing violent behavior. Mostly all the characters involved in the novel are engaged in fight club activities and manifest violent behaviors. On the other hand, the author shows that major characters in *Fight Club* use violence to show their disapproval of ongoing consumer culture and capitalist structure of American society to overthrow it and establish a new social order where they can have a better life.

People in *Fight Club* enjoy attending fight club and learning its cult of violence because it is a way of expressing their hatred of others and the society. They also fight because they want to destroy what they cannot have or what the society denies them. For example, in a pathetic episode, Tyler beats down a handsome young boy because he wanted to destroy anything beautiful he never had in life. The tendency to hurt other people starts by little things like splicing some pornographic pictures into family movies or polluting the food rich people eat.

However, it then becomes a trend where all club members indulge in and spread it as a standard of the club. It is out of this trend to hurt others that Project Mayhem is initiated to fight against conformity and consumer society. Project Mayhem is an organized chaos plan that consists of four committees with determined objectives to accomplish. The common theme of all these committees is to spread violence. Each committee has different challenges. Generally, their purpose is harming society. They have weekly homework assignments to accomplish. For example, they burn houses, fight with people in the street, or point a gun to someone's head to give him a near-death experience so he starts to appreciate life.

In fact, Project Mayhem represents individual potential for violence and destroying the social order. As people engage more in Project Mayhem, it becomes more and more destructive and violent. Members of fight club threaten or even kill anyone who stands on their way. The interesting thing about Project Mayhem is that people are uniformly the same there. Being part of the Project Mayhem means losing one's identity because one becomes a soldier working for Tyler. Men in the project are referred to as Space Monkeys. Every member of the Project has to have five hundred dollars in his shoe for his burial. It means that all members accept violence as a means to justify death and self-denial.

Similar to *Fight Club*, violence in *American Psycho* goes beyond the normal sense of showing aggressive behavior to defend oneself. Violence becomes a psychological obsession from which the main protagonist can find no way out. Bateman believes in no moral values and this allows him to see nothing wrong with violence against himself and others. However, the sadistic tendency to hurt others is much stronger in *American Psycho* because Bateman tortures people to death and enjoys hurting others. This desire to hurt others grows stronger in Bateman and drives him towards insanity. The difference between violence in *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* is that Bateman's sense of violence in *American Psycho* is informed by his class awareness while class differences makes no sense in *Fight Club*. Bateman mostly kills people who are lower than himself on the social hierarchy either because of economic status, gender, ethnicity or sexuality. He kills poor, black people and women because they are helpless compared to his social position. In this sense, Bateman is the symbol of social injustice because as the society oppresses the weak, Bateman abuses his high economic social position to torture those who fall inferior to him. Therefore, violence is a means of establishing individual authority. Of course, generally speaking, violence in *American Psycho* is a satirical representation of postmodern world where aggressive behavior is fostered. It also suggests how people revolt against ongoing social violence by relying on extreme violent acts.

Despite *American Psycho*, violence in *Fight Club* is not the symbol of a means to show disapproval of violence in bigger scale of American society. Bateman commits violence in *American Psycho* out of hatred and jealousy and class differences. This makes him lose many things in his life. On the contrary, violence is an organized activity in *Fight Club* as members of Project Mayhem do collective works in destroying social system. One common thing between the two novels, however, is that violence becomes an obsession to overthrow social system. But

Tyler and his followers in *Fight Club* challenge roots of oppression while Bateman kills victims of oppressive system. In both of the novels there is strong tendency to hurt others but the difference is that Bateman himself is not a victim of social oppression while people in *Fight Club* are from different class members and do not focus on a specific minority group.

American Psycho recounts the story of a man in a society terrorized by alienation and possibility of coming hideous monsters that challenge all norms of humanity. It is only natural that Ellis creates a character by despair and alienation. Social interactions for Bateman are physically and mentally repulsive because he considers himself intellectually superior to everyone else and constructs his mental reality around hatred and resentment of other people. It is out of his hatred of mankind, and his inability to stop doing violence, that Bateman turns to a serial killer and indulges in an unending violence and terror. In simple words, violence in the novel is a means of physical and mental regeneration and the possibility of individual survival. In a world devoid of meaning, violence appears as the last resort of psychophysical survival. In fact, the anticipation that Bateman's compulsive urge to kill introduces a form profundity into his life.

On the other hand, Bateman lives in a world determined by consumerism, power, money, social interactions and specific codes of conduct. The designer clothes and obsessive dieting and toning are extensively represented by the author in *American Psycho* as an important part of Bateman's life to show how he is involved in a materially-driven world. Bateman and the rest of the characters in the novel are obsessed with the act of consumerism. Bateman is constantly trying to gain higher status than his friends, by acquiring items of great value. By purchasing expensive items, Bateman is purchasing social status. He lives in a world where his commodities determine his social value. Thus, he takes great interest in material objects, and describes products more vividly than social relations. His lack of identity has manifested into a desire to fit in by acquiring products of high value. Bateman's class determines his taste in clothes and define his relationship with other people.

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