Pathologies in *Fight Club*

Psychological pathologies in modern society have been labeled and categorized in negative ways due to their misrepresentation and a lack of education amongst society. Psychiatry professors John Coverdale, Raymond Nairn, and Donna Claasen published an article in 2002, “Depictions of Mental Illness in Print Media; A Prospective National Sample,” which addresses this issue. Six-hundred news and editorial pieces were examined in which 61.3% presented mental illness(s) as dangerous to others, while 47.3% attached criminality to disorders (Coverdale et al 698). Stereotypes of adult sexuality and fetishes have attached a stigma to sadism, masochism, and the combination of the two, alluding to pleasure from pain only if sexual gratification is achieved. While it is undoubtedly common for participants to find sexual arousal in administering or receiving pain, it is not an accurate portrayal of the psychological or physiological characteristics. Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) has been typecast as one person balancing two or more personalities to the extremes of comical or homicidal, with little concentration on the causes or effects of the disorder itself. Contemporary writer, Chuck Palahniuk, delivers *Fight Club*, which provides a fictitious and dark setting for sadomasochism and DID to be examined. Through this dramatic context, pathologies in mainstream culture can be broken down and explored in relation to each other, as well societal and political structures.

The nameless narrator of *Fight Club* battles insomnia, initially ignorant to his dissociative identity disorder, so he seeks salvation from sleeplessness in the equally depressing world of support groups. At the beginning of the novel we learn that seven nights a week for the past two years, he has taken refuge at various support groups for cancers, parasites, or blood diseases. Though he is not sick, he feels rejuvenated and alive amongst the grief of the members. He cries with them and explains, “Losing all hope is freedom. Every evening, I died, and every evening, I
was born” (Palahniuk 22). This is where the narrator meets Marla Singer, another “faker” who begins disrupting his world. With this “tourist” now making appearances at the meetings, his insomnia reemerges. With all of the sleepless nights again draining his mind and body, he pushes on with his work as a recall campaign coordinator for an automotive company, hopping from flight to flight, and city to city. While asleep on a beach, he meets Tyler Durden (Palahniuk 32), the man who would forever release him from his need for support groups by introducing him to an unconventional substitute for insomnia.

Tyler Durden emerges with machismo, immediately becoming an influential force in the narrator’s life; Tyler ultimately fights for control of the narrator’s mind and changes the trajectory of his life. While the narrator is the “multiple,” the personality who physically inhabits the body, Tyler is a “self,” a dissociation from the multiple. Upon meeting Tyler, the narrator is unaware of their complex relationship. They form a friendship and when the narrator’s apartment goes up in flames, he turns to Tyler. After an evening of drinking away sorrow, Tyler insists to the narrator, “I want you to do me a favor. I want you to hit me as hard as you can” (Palahniuk 52). The men alternate throwing punches until they are both on their backs in the lot. This is the birth of fight club. What began as a game between these two, spawns an underground club of men from all backgrounds, vying for a spot to fight each other. The UK Times article by Howard Jacobson and Alexander Armstrong, “Sex, love, and rivalry: The truth about male bonding” elaborates on this drama,

It is all but impossible to convey … the idea of a friendship as enduring play. Not play as in pretend, not play as in not be serious, but play as in test out, take the measure of, discover how far you can and cannot go. Play as in destroy. (3)
These men fight in order to bond with each other, display dominance, and to ultimately feel proud and significant when they head back out into their monotonous lives.

As the fight clubs pick up momentum, and its members form Project Mayhem under the guidance of Tyler, the narrator begins to seek him out to end the chaos. His travels take him from place to place where everyone keeps referring to him as “Sir” and “Mr. Durden.” It soon becomes clear to the narrator that he is the man that he has been searching for. As Tyler recounts an event carried out by Project Mayhem, the narrator begins to understand their relationship. He reflects, “Tyler’s telling me this, but somehow, I already know it” (Palahniuk 164). According to Jennifer Radden’s in-depth look at DID in, Divided Minds and Successive Selves, “Multiples report not only degrees of coconsciousness but other forms of interaction among themselves. One self may report hearing, or having heard, the voice(s) of another, (one or more) selves, or may report talking with another” (84). Throughout Fight Club, the narrator relays information, but is unaware of how he acquired the knowledge. After explaining how a projection booth operates, he acknowledges, “I know this because Tyler knows this” (Palahniuk 26). As he learns of his dissociation, the fact that Tyler is a delusion, but nothing more, he aims to end his reign of terror. On top of the Parker Morris Building, the narrator puts a gun in his mouth. He details, “To God, this looks like one man alone, holding a gun in his own mouth, but it’s Tyler holding the gun, and it’s my life” (Palahniuk 203-204). He pulls the trigger. This irrational behavior can be understood according to Radden’s explanation of organic and functional disorders being a prerequisite to moral culpability:

Mental disorders whose origins are understood and established (herein referred to as organic disorders) are distinguishable from those disorders (herein referred to as
functional disorders) whose casual antecedents remain obscure and even controversial.

(Essentially, and in theory, underlying a functional disorder, such as DID or schizophrenia, is an organic disorder, documented and understood, which offers an excuse for morally compromised behavior.

As Tyler Durden becomes stronger, the narrator and his dissociation seek fulfillment and pleasure through sadomasochistic acts. The narrator is an everyday man, not overly masculine, who has fallen victim to a capitalist society; he fetishizes the idealized job, apartment, home furnishings, and attire. Juxtaposed to him is Tyler, the rugged “manly man,” full of fearlessness and machismo. These two identities become intricately entwined in sadomasochistic play. As the narrator finds pleasure in being abused by Tyler, Tyler seeks pleasure in administering the abuse. Outside of the bar the night fight club was invented, the narrator received a beating from Tyler. He enjoyed the pain as much as Tyler, his other “self,” enjoyed administering it; as he requests, “hit me again” (Palahniuk 53). Later, Tyler kisses the narrator’s hand and douses the saliva left behind with lye. Tyler reassures him, “this is the greatest moment of your life. Because everything up until now is a story, and everything after now is a story” (Palahniuk 74-75). Again, Tyler inflicts pain upon the narrator. Lynn M. Ta elaborates on the sadomasochistic acts of this character in her article for The Journal of American Culture, “Hurt So Good: Fight Club, Masculine Violence, and the Crisis of Capitalism.” She hypothesizes:

…Violence is necessary in revealing the instability of gender identity, for in attempting to recover his manhood through Fight Club, [the protagonist] is able to take up both masculine and feminine positions, thereby allowing himself to occupy the role of victim while simultaneously retaining his virility. (Ta 266-267)
Tyler and the narrator play a back and forth game, inflicting pain upon each other to feel something, to find freedom from the dullness and pressures of society. Tyler is created in the image of strength, something the narrator lacks but desires. He recalls Tyler’s words, “One minute was enough … a person had to work hard for it, but one minute of perfection was worth the effort” (Palahniuk 33). Tyler is the narrator’s minute of perfection, his split from himself, an image he covets; therefore, pleasure is derived and he is satisfied.

Chuck Palahniuk provides readers with an opportunity to examine a multitude of psychological pathologies through a dramatized context, giving prominence to the affiliated social and political implications. *Fight Club* explores the development of male dominated clubs to counter the effects of capitalism and mainstream culture, the struggles one may suffer mentally while coping with Dissociative Identity Disorder, and it travels into the misinterpreted realm of sadomasochistic play.

Works Cited


