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**CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S *FIGHT CLUB* AS AN EXAMPLE OF TRANSGRESSIVE
FICTION**

BA thesis

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate how the protest against consumerism is used as a means to highlight the themes of transgressive fiction in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. Transgressive fiction focuses on characters who feel restrained by social norms. Transgressive characters are disobedient, rebellious, aim to displace and destroy authority, break taboos and subvert established norms and conventions. However, in case of success, the characters do not feel relieved, but start depreciating these norms in rather gruesome ways.

Chuck Palahniuk is a renowned author of transgressive fiction. Therefore, his novel *Fight Club* is a good example for analysing anti-consumerism as a theme of transgressive fiction. The book contains numerous examples of anti-consumerism, and the characters in *Fight Club* could be described as transgressive. Moreover, the thesis shows that transgressive fiction is a genre that does not intent to offer proper solutions to social problems, but points out the issues in an uncomfortable and disturbing manner.

The thesis consists of five parts: the introduction, two chapters, and the conclusion. The introduction highlights the importance of the topic. It explains why the theme of anti-consumerism in *Fight Club* is important, what makes it transgressive, and gives an insight into Chuck Palahniuk's writing style.

Chapter 1 gives a brief overview of consumerism, and how it affects people. Also, the chapter defines transgressive fiction as a genre, and offers examples of various themes that are characteristic to the genre.

Chapter 2 analyses anti-consumerism as a theme of transgressive fiction in *Fight Club*, shows how the narrator starts fighting against social norms, why and how are the characters trying to break free from the social norms, what the characters achieve, and how the book points out the issues in a very straightforward manner.

The conclusion summarises the main findings of the thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

At first, it may seem that *Fight Club* is about men who love to have an occasional fight, but this is not the case. I propose that *Fight Club* is a journey of a man who is trying to find his way in life. Most of the research that has been done on *Fight Club* analyse masculinity, free will, violence, mental illness, and provocativeness. However, only a few have researched the theme of anti-consumerism in *Fight Club*. In my opinion, anti-consumerism in *Fight Club* is one of the most important themes since it lays the foundation for everything that is going to happen in the book. If the unnamed narrator was not addicted to buying things, and did not believe he was able to become a complete person through purchasing goods, there would not have been any protest against consumerism in the book.

Moreover, the depiction of anti-consumerism in *Fight Club* makes the book transgressive. More precisely, transgression in the book is closely connected to the ways how the characters decide to fight against consumerist society. However, the characters in *Fight Club* fail in their actions. Firstly, when fight club becomes Project Mayhem, the members start making high-end soap of the fat stolen from liposuction clinic, and sell it to expensive stores to keep their terrorist organization functioning. Secondly, most of the crimes are targeted at the rich, but they are not the regular consumers who buy goods from an IKEA catalogue or work long-hour office jobs. Thirdly, the members of fight club, who later join Project Mayhem, wish to feel alive and have other activities besides tedious office jobs because they were tired of being unimportant persons. However, in Project Mayhem they become even worse: disciples of criminal organization in which asking questions is prohibited and people have names only when they die. Everybody must dress the same, people have very specific tasks, and they should blindly follow their leader. Therefore, I

suggest that the depiction of anti-consumerism in *Fight Club* is transgressive. It is chaotic, unorganized, violent, and at some points incomprehensible which also makes it disturbing.

Chuck Palahniuk, has said that the book was mostly inspired by his involvement with Portland's Cacophony Society. On July 16 in 2012, Inforum at the Commonwealth Club, a non-profit organization in San Francisco, hosted an event titled *Chuck Palahniuk: The Monsters Within*. There is a video of the event on YouTube, and during the interview Palahniuk discussed what inspires him when writing books. Palahniuk brought an example of Cacophony Society. He used the society as the basis of Project Mayhem in *Fight Club*. (Rocha 2014: 3) To quote Palahniuk:

Cacophony Society was basically an organization of people who had really boring jobs. They were letter-carriers for the post office, they were people who were bookstore clerks at Powell's. They were people who had really, very structured hourly-job lives. And they needed a way to have chaos in their lives for a very structured window of time. If we do this kind of a theme party, we can be crazy – we can be insane anarchists—from four o'clock to midnight on Saturday night... People would come up with concepts the way you did when you were kids and you played a game . . . you'd just arbitrarily come up with rules. You know? 'The first rule of Fight Club is you don't talk' – you just come up with a rule and another rule and you invent the game instant. And you have the freedom, the authority, to do that. And Cacophony let us do that every week and give up our boring lives for two or three hours ("Chuck Palahniuk: Need for Chaos and Legacy of Fight Club").

Chuck Palahniuk's writing style could be characterized as bizarre, caustic, and horrific. In a documentary about Palahniuk titled *Postcards from the Future: The Chuck Palahniuk Documentary*, he defines his style as "fiction in which characters misbehave and act badly, so they commit crimes or pranks as a way of either feeling alive, gaining a sense of personal power, or as a political acts of civil disobedience". The documentary was published in 2002 and directed by Dennis Wydmier.

I will also bring a couple of examples from the people who have studied Palahniuk's writing style, and published articles on the topic. Palahniuk is concerned with issues of racism, consumerism, and masculinity disorders. He tries to create his own alternative reality. Jesse Kavaldo, a Professor of English and Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Maryville University, describes his feelings while reading Palahniuk:

"Imagine what it's like to have your eyes rubbed raw with broken glass. This what reading Chuck Palahniuk is like. You feel the shards of your eyes, yes, and then you're being punched hard, your nose is broken. Like the

world is broken. But, somehow, you keep reading. And after you wipe the pulp from your eyes, you realize something. That the world is not broken. Somehow, the world feels more together than before you started. This is what it feels like to read Chuck Palahniuk. Broken, but something disturbing and beautiful recreated in its place. And when you're done, you realize that everything is all right. When you're done, you find yourself thinking about the books. And, maybe, if you're lucky, sounding like them.” (Kavaldo 2013: 3)

To make events seem more life-like, and to help the reader to understand them, Palahniuk uses direct address “you”. This creates a feeling that a narrator in a book addresses the reader in a direct manner. He uses simple and short phrases that are honest, simple, and theatrical. (Mason 2007: 242) Rocha argues that repeating certain lines and writing in verbs instead of adjectives in his stories is characteristic to Palahniuk’s style. (2014: 6) When it comes to the structure and narrative, Rocha thinks that “The narrative of Palahniuk's books are often structured *in medias res*, starting at the temporal end, with the protagonist recounting the events that led up to the point at which the book begins.” (Ibid.: 5) However, there are exception as well. For instance, Palahniuk’s novels *Choke* and *Diary* are written in linear narrative. Rocha adds that Palahniuk's often uses a major twist which is "revealed near the end of the book /.../ (what Palahniuk refers to as "the hidden gun")" (Ibid.) Palahniuk also uses unusual humour and strange ideas in his works to expose various social flaws and to criticise these in the darkest of ways. (Hell 2004: 4) He refers to his style as a minimalistic approach, meaning that "his writings use a limited vocabulary and short sentences to mimic the way an average person telling a story would talk." (Rocha 2014: 6) Moreover, Rocha adds that Palahniuk said in an interview that he "prefers to write in verbs instead of adjectives. Repetitions of certain lines in the stories' narratives are one of the most common aspects of his writing style." (Ibid.)

Palahniuk does not intend to offer solutions to problems, but shows various social issues to the reader in a very sincere manner. He does this in a way that makes the reader feel discomfort, frustration, and horror. The characters do not abandon the things they are

obsessed with, but start destroying and fighting against the objects and norms they wished to achieve earlier. The narrator of *Fight Club* could have stopped buying things. Nobody forced him to become a leader of an underground protest movement, but somehow it turned out so. It appears that the characters in *Fight Club* opt for rather extremist and violent ways when it comes to problem solving.

Palahniuk became interested in consumerism and its impact on people during the time he lived in a small farmhouse. He was underprivileged, and the only way to cope with the world he lived in was by writing. Some of the main themes Palahniuk uses in his works are anti-consumerism, inner emptiness and suppression of individuality. According to Kavaldo, the typical Palahniuk's character is an individual who have been marginalized from his society. (2013: 7) Moreover, Palahniuk's characters are trying to find their way in postmodern world which is full of surveillance and mass media. (Rubin & Kuhn 2009: 16) Rocha (2014: 6) adds that the characters often fall into deep philosophical dialogue and offer rather uncommon and absurd ideas on why society works in the way it does. The ideas tend to be misanthropic and are based on issues concerning death, morality, childhood, sexuality, and God.

To clarify the structure of the thesis, I am going to offer a brief explanation of its parts. The first part of the thesis is a theoretical one, offering a short overview of consumerism because this causes protesting against consumerist society in *Fight Club*. I will provide a brief overview of consumerism and transgressive fiction because I believe that this helps the reader getting a better insight into the topic.

The second part of the thesis analyse Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. Specifically, I am going to demonstrate how the protest against consumerism is used as a means to highlight the themes of transgressive fiction in *Fight Club*. The theme of anti-consumerism can be found throughout the book. Therefore, the analysis will be descriptive in order to help the

reader to understand how and why anti-consumerism is approached in the novel. *Fight Club* is written *in medias res*, meaning that it opens in the midst of action, is like a mosaic, and the whole point of the story becomes clear in the end of the book. This is another reason why I opt for descriptive approach.

1. CONSUMERISM AND TRANSGRESSIVE FICTION

1.1 Consumerism

The Great Depression reshaped Americans view on consumption. Stearns (2001: 48) write that the time “was characterized by a very uneven distribution of income, a concentration of capital, and a lack of further prospects of productive investment”. William H. Young and Nancy K. Young (2007: 1) add that in the first half of the 20th-century advertisements changed. Companies urged people to consume more because the amount a person consumed showed his social status, benefits, and pleasure. Additionally, consumerism became popular in the U.S. because it was related to major political ideals: liberty and democracy. So, consumerism made establishing a new personal identity easy without harming family, friends, or being self-destructive. (Cross 2000: 2)

In 2016, a documentary titled *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things* was released. The documentary is about two men who had high-wage jobs and who could buy everything they ever wished for. At some point, they decided to quit their jobs and started to consume as little as possible because they understood that consumption is not the key to happiness. In the documentary, the men discuss that American society is largely based on consumerism. The nation wants to portray itself through the American dream which is equality, welfare, and freedom. In truth, it is more about consumption and economic security. People concentrate on buying a new cell phone or having a new car, and fail to pay attention to the other values of the American dream. The documentary highlights that people are purchasing various goods rather because of hope, but not because of need. Companies are selling a hope of what their merchandise will do for people. In the early days of the American Dream, it was more about establishing oneself, about opportunities what the nation could offer. Now, the American Dream is mostly about filling the inner emptiness,

and hope that happiness is around the corner: if you buy two more outfits and another fashionable clock, you will be complete.

The Feelings Consumerism Create

Steven Miles (1998: 1) states that “consumerism is ubiquitous and ephemeral. It is arguably the religion of the late twentieth century”. People consume to fill their inner emptiness. It also provides satisfaction which is alike to religion. One could be an adversary, but could still go on a shopping spree and feel happy. It seems that the clothes people buy fill their inner emptiness and make them feel better. When people go to church and obey the rules, they feel satisfied because they served God and did not break any rules. According to Grace Ji-Sun Kim, an Associate Professor of Theology at Earlham School of Religion, (2013: 36) this can be compared to people who work long hours to earn money and then spend it on a lot of clothes. Such people may not need new clothes because their old ones are worn out, but they need them because it is comparable to re-creating themselves repeatedly. For instance, a person feels that he needs to change his life. He wants to experience something new and become like the people he sees around him every day. So, he observes what they do and wear. Next, he visits a store and purchases several new outfits because it makes him feel like that he belongs to somewhere. However, a new outfit does not define a person, nor does it change someone’s identity.

Further, consumerism offers self-satisfaction and creates false hopes. Fictitious needs suppress real ones, and advertisements that encourage us to live like models create disappointment and make people dissatisfied with their lives. Stearns (1997: 105) states that “a consumerist society involves large numbers of people staking a real portion of their personal identities and their quest for meaning – even their emotional satisfaction – on the

search for and acquisition of goods.” Various advertisements inspire people to buy things and try to create emotion in them as much as possible. Advertisements try to create a story around the products using various trademarks, pictures, and sounds. This makes a product unique and works as stimuli to buy it, meaning that seeing a familiar brand logo or a text creates good feelings and one feels the need to buy the advertised product. One feels the need to buy a product because it somehow defines him.

According to Richard J. Hart (2009: 41), consumerism captures people and to disentangle ourselves from it, one needs to expose the falsehood and illusion of liberty it creates. Hart argues that the less people consume, the happier they feel, and only the disciplined ones can notice the difference between real needs and illusions created by advertisements. A clever Samsung advertisement comes to mind. The advertisement introduced a new smartphone with an extra-large screen. On the advertisement next to the smartphone was a simple question: do you take notes? Some people may start thinking about the question and conclude that if they would buy the phone, they would start taking more notes because it seems comfortable, and if they take more notes, their lives become better because they are more organized. *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things* (2016) offers examples of advertisements of clothing-retail companies make. For instance, in one clip there is a discussion about an advertisement which introduces 33 different outfits, and the slogan on the advertisement is “the guy who has it all”. These are just a couple of examples of how advertisements create false hopes and illusions through clever questions and sentences.

According to Jay McDaniel (2000: 62), there are six reasons why people start to consume more: 1) appearance is very important to many people; 2) keeping oneself busy by work shows high productivity; 3) being a loving person does not necessarily mean that one must be a white-collar; 4) working at home means that one is not getting paid; 5) people

should not please God, but collect money; 6) one should always put his own needs before everything else, and shopping makes one happy. These six ways illustrate that consumerism is harmful for our health, psychological state, and life in general.

Consumerism discards our true self and replaces it with socially construed ideas of perfection. (Parashar et al 2009: 8) Pamela Ugwudike suggests that people may become criminals to obtain material possessions because they are desperate and busy acquiring various things. (2005: 127) According to Stearns (1997: 105), modern consumerism “have produced new forms of theft, a deviant measure of yearning: widespread clothing thefts, and the bizarre attacks on teenagers for the sake of athletic shoes in the late twentieth century.”

To most people, consumerism is a way of showing others that they belong to certain social group. Buying fancier clothes, having cheekbones defined, or achieving a well-toned body through plastic surgery are only some of many ways how to *buy* social acceptance. Thus, people do not necessarily shop because they want to satisfy their own needs, but they want to belong to certain section of society, and consumerism lets them become somebody else. (Todd 2012: 49) For instance, a person may buy uncomfortable clothes or own an advanced smartphone because he wants to leave an impression that he is living a certain lifestyle. Stearns (1997: 106) adds that “consumerism both orients and confuses social structures. Earning power and the ability to afford particular living standards do increasingly anchor a consumerist class hierarchy, replacing legal privilege and other prior trappings of status.”

In conclusion, it could be said that consumerism is paradoxical. On the one hand, it is destructive, but on the other hand, it is a problem-solver that people use to fill their emptiness, needs, and desires. People sell their souls to become somebody else through consumerism. The wish to become someone else is put in their minds by advertisements that give false ideas of what is socially acceptable and how a perfect person must look. So, even

if one feels happiness for a moment because of buying something new, it is only temporary. Eventually one would feel emptiness and dissatisfaction again. Therefore, consumerism is harmful.

1.2 Transgressive fiction

Since anti-consumerism is a theme of transgressive fiction, I give a brief overview of the genre as well. The term “transgressive fiction” was coined in 1993 by Michael Silverblatt, an American broadcaster, who has been the host of Bookworm (a nationally syndicated radio program focusing on books and literature, when *Los Angeles Times* published an article titled “Shock Appeal: Who Are These Writers, and Why Do They Want to Hurt Us”. Silverblatt recognized transgressive fiction as a new and hurtful genre which is straightforward. It consists of taboo topics like sex, violence, drug abuse, and rape. However, such content is not used to show people that these topics are taboo, and they should avoid them. Transgressive writers are satiric and write about bizarre topics as they were normal. Their goal is not to shock the reader, but to invite discussion and controversy, so people would face the reality of our world. The predecessor of transgressive fiction was the mock epic which is usually unwelcome. Mock epic exaggerates, uses sarcasm, and juxtapositions to prove point. (Mookerjee 2013: 2)

Transgressive fiction points out a problem, but does not offer a solution. The genre does not try to fix issues that occur in society, or in people’s lives. It also does not try to make people behave in a better way. On the contrary, such content is used to provoke people and to make them uncomfortable. Mookerjee (2013: 1-2) defines literary transgression as follows: “it achieves an audience among the cultural elites while maintaining neutrality, a refusal to take sides in the debates brought up by the subject matter of the work. This

masterstroke forces the audience to face the subject matter of the work directly, rather than through the optic of a system or theory.”

Silverblatt continues that transgressive fiction may be a new term, but it is an old genre. He points to Marquis de Sade, claiming that de Sade, who was born in 1740 to a noble family and whose essays are full of obscene descriptions, “is disgusting, but the disgust he inspires is absolute and therefore valuable.” He adds that although Sade’s own life was pathetic, he created a world in his mind, and described it to an extent which made his works unreadable to most people. (Silverblatt 1993) Michael Foucault, a philosopher and a cultural theorist, argues: “the moment that Sade delivered its first words and marked out, in a single discourse, the boundaries of what suddenly became its kingdom, the language of sexuality has lifted us into the night where God is absent, and where all of our actions are addressed to this absence in a profanation which at once identifies it, dissipates it, exhausts itself in it, and restores it to the empty purity of its transgression.” (Foucault 1977: 31) He was one of the first to define transgression as “crossing”, meaning that it can be crossing a moral line, or defying the law. He adds that to analyse transgression, it should be free from “the scandalous and the subversive”, meaning that transgression may be hard to understand if one is disturbed by the feeling it creates. (Ibid.: 35) This is important when it comes to analysing transgressive literature. For instance, if a reader is unaffected of such feelings, he could analyse why the narrator/Tyler Durden in *Fight Club* chose to act the way he did because the reader does not concentrate on the obscene situations and descriptions of various acts that may cause disgust.

Therefore, I would define transgressive fiction as a genre that studies experiences and taboo topics which people avoid discussing such as rape (Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange*), madness (Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*), murder (Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*), and personality disorder (Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*, *Choke*). However, such topics are not primarily important because transgressive works invite to discuss on the types of feelings and decisions characters make and what is the root of the problem.

2. ANALYSING THE THEME OF ANTI-CONSUMERISM IN *FIGHT CLUB*

The aim of this chapter is to analyse how the protest against consumerism is used as a means to highlight the themes of transgressive fiction in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. This chapter discusses how the narrator starts fighting against social norms, how are the characters trying to break free from the norms, and how the book points out the issues in a manner characteristic to transgressive fiction. FC is the abbreviation for *Fight Club*.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator starts telling how he became friends with Tyler Durden and why. Later it is revealed that Tyler is the alter-ego of the unnamed narrator who had dissociative personality disorder (FC: 168). The disorder developed because his life became miserable. A character with mental issues is characteristic to transgressive fiction. However, the unnamed character's mental illness leads to consumerism which leads to anti-consumerism. The way how anti-consumerism is depicted in the book is transgressive. More specifically, the actions taken to protest against consumerism and the rich, and the descriptions of these actions in *Fight Club* are transgressive in nature.

The unnamed narrator describes that he used to buy all the things he thought he needed, but that was not enough. He adds that he was unhappy and thought that happiness was around the corner, and the more he consumed, the closer he got to it. The narrator tells that he lived in a condominium on the fifteenth floor of a high-rise building meant for widows and young professionals. There were no openable windows and the room smelled like "the last meal you cooked or your last trip to the bathroom." (FC: 41) According to the narrator, he had a nesting instinct: to feel complete, he needed to fill his home with everything he liked. Since he did not have any friends or hobbies, he spent all his free time

on making his home complete with the help of an IKEA catalogue. To illustrate this, I will bring an example from the book:

And I wasn't the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue. We all have the same Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern. /.../ We all have the same Rislampa/Har paper lamps made from wire and environmentally friendly unbleached paper. All that sitting in the bathroom. / The Alle cutlery service. Stainless steel. Dishwasher safe. / The Vild hall clock made of galvanized steel, oh, I had to have that. / The Klipsk shelving unit, oh, yeah. / Helming hat boxes. Yes. /.../ The Mommala quilt-cover set. Design by Thomas Harila. /.../ It took my whole life to buy this stuff (FC: 43)

This is an example of consumerism and the quote illustrates how the narrator knew exactly what kind of furniture he had, what different pieces were called, and who designed them.

Moreover, the character's deep knowledge of such specifics illustrates Palahniuk's writing style as well. He continues:

You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple years you're satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you've got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug. / Then you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you. (FC: 44)

Material possessions were the narrator's life. This was all he had and cared for. The narrator had neither friends nor a girlfriend. His parents separated when he was six years old. The narrator's life was empty, and he filled this emptiness with things he could buy. He wanted to be complete and follow the American Dream in a stereotypical sense.

Later, the narrator understands that "advertisements have people chasing cars and clothes they don't need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need." (FC: 149) Until the narrator's mind created Tyler Durden, he defined himself by the things he owned: "I loved my life. I loved that condo. I loved every stick of furniture. That was my whole life. Everything, the lamps, the chairs, the rugs were me. The dishes in the cabinets were me. The plants were me. The television was me." (FC: 110-111) However, at one point the narrator becomes restless, he becomes insomniac and is not able to sleep. He visits a doctor who refuses to give him sleeping pills. The narrator tells the doctor that he is in pain, and the doctor suggests visiting support groups to see real pain. The narrator starts going to various support group. He goes to a different one every day, and never uses his real name. The narrator likes it because for him it is a new way to fill the

emptiness inside him. He can sleep again. He describes it as “I was lost inside oblivion, dark and silent and complete. /.../ Walking home after a support group, I felt more alive than I’d ever felt. I wasn’t host to cancer or blood parasites; I was the little warm centre that the life of the world crowded around. /.../ Every evening, I died, and every evening, I was born.” (FC: 22) All the narrator ever wants is to feel alive and complete. At first, buying furniture makes him feel alive and when that is not enough anymore then he finds support groups.

At one point, everything is ruined again for the narrator. A mysterious woman named Marla Singer starts to visit all the support groups the narrator goes. The narrator senses that she is a faker as well. Therefore, he cannot sleep again because there is another faker present and somehow it annoys the narrator. He decides to go on a vacation which is the point when the narrator’s personality splits and he starts fighting against social norms, his life, and he becomes self-destructive. The narrator meets Tyler at a nude beach. Truly, he does not meet him, but creates Tyler because he is the alter-ego of the freer narrator. Tyler is everything the narrator subconsciously had ever wished for. “I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world. Tyler is capable and free, and I am not.” (FC: 174) Tyler appears when the narrator becomes trapped while trying to become complete by consumption, but at one point he realises that this does not fill the emptiness inside him anymore. The narrator describes his feelings:

I was tired and crazy and rushed, and every time I boarded a plane, I wanted the plane to crash. I envied people dying of cancer. I hated my life. I was tired and bored with my job and my furniture, and I couldn’t see any way to change things. / Only end them. / I felt trapped. / I was too complete. / I was too perfect. (FC: 172-173) This quote illustrates the turning point in narrator’s life. The point where he feels that

something must be changed. Instead of consuming less and finding a new hobby, the unnamed narrator becomes anti-consumerist. I believe that this is characteristic to transgressive fiction since the action taken is extremist, and eventually results in violence, destruction, and crossing boundaries of civil way of life. The narrator starts a fight club to

fight against everything he suddenly started to hate but loved before. This is another way to fill his inner emptiness: Marla ruined the support groups, and furniture was not enough anymore. The narrator's way of connecting with other people is gone, he does not feel alive anymore. Earlier the narrator concentrated on self-improvement:

It used to be enough that when I came home angry and knowing that my life wasn't toeing my five-year plan, I could clean my condominium or detail my car. Someday I'd be dead without a scar and there would be a really nice condo and car. Really, really nice, until the dust settled or the next owner. (FC: 49)

Suddenly, the narrator wishes to distance himself from the lifestyle he has built for himself. This could also be the reason why the narrator seeks for ways of self-destruction.

The narrator is not able to leave sterile and corporate lifestyle behind all by himself.

He needs Tyler Durden, the other side of his split personality, to do that. The way the character abandons all the things he possesses and starts fighting against consumerism is characteristic to transgressive fiction: it is nihilistic, destructive, and violent. First, the narrator causes a gas leak in his condominium, resulting in explosion a few days later while he is on a business trip. In truth, it is Tyler who does it. He exists when the narrator is asleep. The narrator thinks he is suffering from insomnia because as soon as he falls asleep, he wakes up a moment later as Tyler Durden. Since the condominium is the narrator's life and everything he cares for, Tyler has to eliminate it. It is the narrator's subconscious freeing the narrator from what he hates. On the one hand, he is repeating to himself that this is everything he loves because he has worked hard to buy all those things. On the other hand, he bought those things because the society created an illusion that he needed everything he saw in the catalogues and on advertisements. This is the point where the narrator's life takes another radical turn: he starts living with Tyler Durden who lives in an old abandoned house which is illustrated by the following quote:

The rain comes through and collects on top of the ceiling plaster and drips down through the light fixtures. When it's raining, we have to pull the fuses. /.../ Everywhere there are rusted nails to step on or snag your elbow on. /.../ The house is waiting for something, a zoning change or a will to come out of probate, and then it will be torn down. /.../ There's no lock on the front door from when police or whoever kicked in the door. There's nine layers of wallpaper swelling on the dining-room walls, flowers under stripes under flowers under birds under grasscloth. /.../ There's nothing else on Paper Street except for warehouses and the pulp mill. /.../ Tyler and I are alone for a half mile in every direction. (FC: 57-58)

This is the house where the narrator lives now instead of the perfect condominium. Now, the narrator is without all his things and lives with Tyler who is the perfect boyfriend to continue his journey towards freedom with.

Another extreme turn the narrator takes is committing various petty crimes with Tyler. This is his and Tyler's way to protest against consumerism. By consumerism, I mean not only material possessions, but food, service industry, the rich, and entertainment industry as well. It is characteristic to transgressive literature because when the narrator seems to have an issue, his subconscious – Tyler – acts in a destroying and extremist way. It is something a mentally healthy person would not do. If a healthy person feels that he needs to stop making his life complete by buying furniture from catalogues, he would find a new hobby or does something with his friends. He would not cause an intended gas leak that would make his condominium explode. However, the narrator's/Tyler's way of solving things characterises how issues are being settled in transgressive fiction. Some other solution would not be shocking, hurtful or devastating, and therefore it could not be listed under transgression.

Further, the narrator and especially Tyler try to devastate the life of the rich. This is another way how the protest against consumerism is depicted in *Fight Club*. For example, Tyler works as a movie projectionist. He starts taking a single frame of pornography and “splice this frame of a lunging red penis or a yawning wet vagina close-up into another feature movie. /.../ A single frame in a movie is on the screen for one-sixtieth of a second. (FC: 30) So, for the narrator/Tyler it is not important that the people who are watching the movie would know that they were shown a single frame of pornography, but it is the mischief itself that counts. What's more, the narrator/Tyler also works in an elegant downtown hotel named The Pressman. Tyler calls himself “a service industry terrorist. Guerilla waiter. Minimum-wage despoiler.” (FC: 84) Since the people who visit the hotel are high-ranking

officials and other very wealthy people, he spoils the food by urinating in it. He also passes gas from his digestive system on some foods and does other such things to make the food inedible. Again, the people eating the food do not know about it. For Tyler, fighting with consumerist society is never about earning credit or informing his victims that they ate a soup which contained urine. Tyler tells a story that when the hotel staff was asked to cater for the rich during a social gathering held in a mansion, Tyler sneaked into the hostess's bedroom and left her a note. The note was among fragrance bottles, saying "I have passed an amount of urine into at least one of your many elegant fragrances." (FC: 82) This was Tyler's first "mission". (FC: 84) I would suggest that the narrator/Tyler protests against consumerism in a way that at first the people enjoying the ruined meals or watching the movies with pornographic frames think that everything is in order. They believe to be receiving what is worth their money, but in truth they are being cheated. Tyler's protest is like a disease that does not show itself at first, but when it becomes deadly there is nothing anyone can do about it. It is like an aggressive cancer because more and more people are joining the cause.

The narrator's/Tyler's protest leads to fight club which leads to coordinated criminal organization called Project Mayhem. First, I will discuss the phenomenon behind fight club. The phrase *fight club* may leave an impression that people meet to fight with each other, but there is more to it.

Who guys are in fight club is not who they are in the real world. Even if you told the kid in the copy centre that he had a good fight, you wouldn't be talking to the same man. / Who I am in fight club is not someone my boss knows. / After night in fight club, everything in the real world gets the volume turned down. Nothing can piss you off. Your word is law, and if other people break the law or question you, even that doesn't piss you off. /.../ Fight club isn't about winning or losing fights. Fight club isn't about words. You see a guy come to fight club for the first time, and his ass a loaf of white bread. You see this same guy here six month later, and he looks carved out of wood. (FC: 49-51)

So, in the beginning fight club is a radical psychotherapy. It acts as a healing agent for the narrator. Chuck Palahniuk, the author of *Fight Club*, has commented on what fight club was: "a regularly occurring community where the participants could abandon their normal lives

and feel connected to their peers.” (Palahniuk 2008) According to Henry Giroux, an American and Canadian scholar and cultural critic, (2001: 19) “violence in Fight Club is treated as a sport, a crucial component that lets men connect with each other through the overcoming of fear, pain, and fatigue, while revelling in the illusions of a paramilitary culture.” So, the men attending fight club connect with each other by fighting. The narrator, however, do not connect with the other members of fight club. He do not feel like he is a member of the community. The only connection he has is with Tyler, but since Tyler is his alter-ego and does not exist in real life, the narrator soon feels loneliness again. He felt similar restlessness when consumerism and support groups failed to satisfy his needs. Therefore, “his participation in the group is an avenue for the destruction of the aspects of his life he finds repulsive.” (Elliott 2015: 45) The narrator says: “maybe self-improvement isn’t the answer /.../ Maybe self-destruction is the answer” (FC: 49) The narrator had a fight with a guy who he described as beautiful as an angel. “The violence is not without a purpose, though. It helps the narrator to confront hidden parts of himself.” (Elliott 2015: 44) He destroys the man’s face and feels that he has destroyed something very beautiful. The narrator feels that this is something satisfying and the other half of him, Tyler, decides that it is time to take fight club to next level. What is characteristic here to transgressive fiction is that something obscene evolves into something that is even worse. The more the story evolves, the more disturbing it becomes.

Fight club evolves into Project Mayhem. The original point of Project Mayhem is “to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history” (FC: 122), but soon the project becomes a protest against consumerism. “The agenda of Tyler’s organization is a logical extention of the narrator’s initial view of society: a shell built around life to maintain illusion of permanence.” (Mookerjee 2013: 227) Project Mayhem develops into something that can be described by Tyler’s previous actions: sabotaging movies, ruining

food, etc. Only this time it is a large-scale organization and the crimes the members of Project Mayhem commit against consumerism and society are more serious. “Each committee meets on a different night: / Arson meets on Monday / Assault on Tuesday / Mischief meets on Wednesday / And Misinformation meets on Thursday.” (FC: 119) There are numerous members on each committee and everyone has one specific assignment. Only Tyler knows the whole plan, which is to destroy the civilization so everything could start from the beginning. However, people need a reason to protest against consumerism. Even if it is futile. Tyler’s idea was following:

You have a class of young strong men and women, and they want to give their life something. Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they don’t need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don’t really need. / 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. (FC: 149)

When at first the narrator felt that he was dissatisfied with his life and needed to re-discover himself, he subconsciously gathered likeminded people. The narrator’s previous lifestyle can be used as an example to illustrate the quote. He also felt a great spiritual depression and needed help. Unfortunately, the help is Tyler with whom he creates Project Mayhem which, on the one hand, directly targets everyone who consumes anything. On the other hand, Tyler orders the members of Project Mayhem to make soap. The soap is made from the stolen liposuctioned fat of rich people and it is sold back to them. So, Tyler’s protest against consumerism actually helps to reinforce a consumerist society. (Elliott: 48) Therefore, in a way Project Mayhem fails to protest against consumerism, because they participate in capitalism instead. Moreover, the soap may be a metaphor that Palahniuk uses to show that Tyler wishes to break free from commodity-based culture, but he and the narrator are unsuccessful. Elliott (2015: 50) argues that “Tyler’s participation in a capitalist enterprise undermines his anti-establishment rhetoric. He desires to distance himself from corporate America and the need for success, but his participation in this environment – albeit for destructive purposes – illustrates how his anarchism is an incomplete philosophy.” The

organization starts committing various crimes as well, but they do not seem to have a deep understanding why they are committing such crimes. “You don’t ask questions is the first rule in Project Mayhem.” (FC: 122) The same men who hated their jobs because they had become robots start to follow Tyler and Project Mayhem without asking questions. They become the robots they were fighting against, but in a different way. Such behaviour is typical of transgressive fiction because the characters “constantly seek out or tolerate undesirable situations.” (Mookerjee 2013: 222)

According to Henry Giroux (2001: 17), the protest against consumerism in *Fight Club* criticises “ideological force and existential experiences that weakens and domesticates men, robbing them of their primary role as producers whose bodies affirm and legitimate their sense of agency and control.” He continues to argue that the members of the fight club and Project Mayhem do not fight against consumerism, the rich and large corporation because they are jealous of or just do not like them, but because, according to Tyler, consumerism makes men feminine and suppresses their masculinity. In Giroux’ words:

Fight Club has nothing to say about the structural violence of unemployment, job insecurity, cuts in public spending, and the destruction of institutions capable of defending social provisions and the public good. On the contrary, Fight Club defines the violence of capitalism almost exclusively in terms of an attack on traditional (if not to say regressive) notions of masculinity, and in doing so reinscribes white, heterosexuality within a dominant logic of stylized brutality and male bonding that appears predicated on the need to denigrate and wage war against all that is feminine. In this instance, the crisis of capitalism is reduced to the crisis of masculinity, and the nature of the crisis lies less in the economic, political, and social conditions of capitalism itself than in the rise of a culture of consumption in which men are allegedly domesticated, rendered passive, soft and emasculated. (Ibid.: 5)

However, I think that this is only one way how to interpret the story. In my opinion, *Fight Club* is not about protesting against consumerist culture because it makes feminine, but it is more about self-discovery and re-defining oneself. People need to re-think who they are because so far, they have defined themselves by the things they own, and how much money they have in the bank. Of course, this is one way to live by if that makes a person happy. The narrator, however, was unhappy with his life. It could even be said that the narrator’s life was a make-believe because at some point he told himself that he loved everything he had, but later Tyler told him that the narrator’s personality split because he needed to fight

with everything he hated in his life. So, I do not agree with Giroux because consumerism itself does not make a man feminine. According to Oxford Dictionary, the word ‘femininity’ is defined as ‘Qualities or attributes regarded as characteristic of women.’ To my mind, we cannot say that if a person buys things and likes to eat at elegant restaurants, he is feminine. If a man buys girlish clothes and acts in a certain way, then we could say that he is feminine. Therefore, femininity does not depend on how much a person consumes.

However, the point of transgressive fiction is not to offer solutions. Transgressive fiction evokes feelings of disgust, shock, obscenity. The *solution* is often radical, extremist approach. In *Fight Club*, Tyler does not start writing articles on how the consumerist society is harmful for the people or why should big corporations change their behaviour. He gathers men and makes them his disciples instead. Tyler’s goal is to destroy the civilization, so everything could start from the beginning. It is not characteristic to transgressive fiction to take a soft, wise, and considered approach in problem solving. Nevertheless, violence and destruction in *Fight Club* could be defined as a solution. It is a different kind of solution, an uncomfortable one, but to Tyler’s mind, destroying everything is the fix to the problem.

The transgression in the book lies in the actions of the characters. If the narrator would not have developed Tyler, his alter-ego and would have sought professional help to solve his issues, the whole story would not have been transgressive. Anti-consumerism is one of the elements of transgressive fiction because of the approach the characters take to fight against the consumerist society. Further, the way the characters choose to fight is even more characteristic to transgressive fiction. They are willing to become Tyler’s disciples and complete every task Tyler gives them without asking questions. They want to become free because they do not like their jobs and their life in general, but they become even worse. For instance, some of the disciples have only one task: it could be cleaning the toilet or washing the bowls used to make soap. They must trust Tyler and follow his orders without asking

questions. To my mind, this makes the book more transgressive. It seems that the elements of transgressive fiction in *Fight Club* are very much connected. For instance, there is violence because the characters need to fight against something.

CONCLUSION

Anti-consumerism is a theme of transgressive fiction that is represented in *Fight Club* throughout the book. What makes the unnamed narrator's and his alter-ego Tyler's actions transgressive is the way they choose to protest against consumerism. However hard the character tries to become better or destroy the civilisation, he fails.

Firstly, the narrator always felt isolated and alone. He tried buying furniture, attending support groups, establishing fight club and Project Mayhem, but none of those mattered because he was unable to receive the satisfaction he wished for. Fight club developed into criminal organization named Project Mayhem. However, people joined fight club at first because they wished to be someone else for a moment besides who they were during the day. Nevertheless, in Project Mayhem they become something worse: disciples of criminal organization in which asking questions was prohibited and people had names only when they died. Everybody had to dress the same, people had specific tasks, and they had to blindly follow their leader.

Secondly, in my opinion Project Mayhem failed because they made high-end soap from the stolen liposuctioned fat of rich people, and it was sold back to them in expensive stores. So, Tyler's protest against consumerism actually helped to reinforce a consumerist society. Moreover, the men who wanted to become free became consumers of violence, helped to reinforce consumerist society, and were disciples of Tyler Durden.

Thirdly, it seems that Project Mayhem lead by Tyler targeted the rich. However, the rich portrayed in the book were not the kind of consumers that needed to be fought against to set an example. I believe that the men in the book should have targeted people like the narrator who felt the need to fill his inner emptiness by buying everything he saw in IKEA catalogue. To my mind, people like the narrator need a meaning of life. So, a support group would have helped, a hobby, a relationship, friends, and various other healthy activities.

Anti-consumerism as a theme of transgressive fiction is a considerable part of *Fight Club*. Anti-consumerism itself is not transgressive, but transgressive is the way the characters choose to protest against consumerism. They start a terrorist organization, use violence, cross lines and boundaries, and hurt the society in a shocking and disturbing way. The narrator takes an extremist approach as well. Feeling the urge to stop consuming, he makes his apartment to explode.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Karl-Martin Idol

Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* As An Example of Transgressive Fiction

Chuck Palahniuki "Kakluskubi" kui näide hälbekirjandusest

Bakalaureusetöö

2018

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Annotatsioon:

Töö peamine eesmärk on vaadelda Chuck Palahniuki teost "Kakluskubi" kui hälbekirjanduse žanri alla kuuluvat raamatut. Täpsemini uurisin, kuidas "Kakluskubi" tegelased protesteerivad tarbimise ja tarbimisühiskonna vastu ja kuidas nende tegevusi on kujutatud. Kuna tarbimisühiskonnastatus on "Kakluskubis" läbiv teema ja see käivitab kogu sündmusteahela, siis arvan, et just seeläbi on hea vaadelda tegelaste käitumist ja proovida aru saada nende tehtud otsustest.

Töö koosneb sissejuhatusest, teoreetilisest ja empiirilisest osast ning kokkuvõttest. Sissejuhatuses kirjeldan uuritava teema olulisust ja annan ülevaate, mis inspireeris kirjanik Chuck Palahniuki kirjutama teost "Kakluskubi". Teoreetilise osaga annan põgusa ülevaate hälbekirjanduse žanrist ja tarbimisühiskonnas arengust Ameerikas. Empiirilises osas analüüsin tarbimisühiskonnastatus "Kakluskubis". Teema analüüsimiseks kasutan ohtralt kirjeldusi raamatus, kuna raamat on kirjutatud *in medias res* narratiivis ja nii on lugejal teemast lihtsam aru saada, sest kõik on omavahel seotud.

Kokkuvõttes väidan, et meeste algatatud kakluskubi kukkus läbi. Nad võitlesid inimeste vastu, kes polnudki tüüpilised tarbijad. Lisaks vajasisid nad protesteerimiseks raha, mistõttu muutusid nad ise ostjatekst-müüjateks. Samuti muutusid nad uue liikumise orjadeks sarnaselt varasema tarbimisorjusega. Kahtlemata on tarbimisühiskonnastatus raamatus oluline teema, sest tegelaste teod ja suhtumine muudabki kogu teose transgressiivse ehk hälbekirjanduse alla kuuluvaks.

Märksõnad: ameerika kirjandus, hälbekirjandus, Chuck Palahniuk, tarbimisühiskond, tarbimine, vägivald, transgressioon, nihilism.

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