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UNCOVERING THE GOTHIC IN CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S "INCLINATIONS"

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It is no surprise that the value of Chuck Palahniuk's works, characterized by unorthodox plot developments, outrageous characters, vulgar humor, grotesque detail, and disturbing violence, is frequently interrogated by readers and critics alike. Indeed, Palahniuk, most popularly known for his 1996 novel *Fight Club*, is notorious for his hyperbolic and crude works. His novels have been described as "cheap high school nihilism" and "a close literary relative to NBC's 'Fear Factor,' in which contestants compete to see who can best retain their composure while being deluged in buckets of bugs" (Kuhn and Rubin 2). Another critic of Palahniuk novels suggests that Palahniuk aims "to attack the shallow, simplistic, dehumanizing culture [...] by writing shallow, simplistic, dehumanized fiction" (Kuhn and Rubin 2). These opinions, however, greatly contrast with those that see Palahniuk's works as critiques of the world around us. Read Mercer Schuchardt identifies Palahniuk as "the documenter of our world of disparate contradictions," and refers to him as contemporary society's "existentialist paramedic" (Schuchardt 3-4). Schuchardt parallels the works of Palahniuk with a means of evaluating our existence in society, suggesting that Palahniuk shows his readers "a mirror" to "let [them] see just how badly beat up [they] really are" (4). Palahniuk leaves his readers feeling "more hopeful, less lonely, [and] less despairing" by creating characters who "present the reader with an occasion for something unusual" (4). These paradoxical interpretations of Palahniuk's works raise the following question: how should we interpret Palahniuk's raw, violent, suspenseful, psychologically twisted narratives?

Over the course of his writing career, Palahniuk has consistently produced novels that examine the process of identity and self-construction by introducing various

characters who are each challenged by a particular social restraint. These fictitious characters, and their defiance of social norms, be it hypersexuality, transsexuality, homosexuality, religion, addiction, violence, terrorism, pornography, etc., serve to hyperbolically illustrate social situations in contemporary society. More importantly, however, Palahniuk's works aim to highlight societal reactions to these defiances.

The emphasis that Palahniuk places on social deviance is obvious when examining his more popular novels. For example, *Fight Club*, narrated by an unnamed, apathetic insomniac who works a typical office job, discusses issues of masculinity using the narrator and his charismatic alter-ego, Tyler Durden. The "two" declare war on corporate America for emasculating men by trapping them in an idealized, redundant identity that is the nine-to-five office employee. In order to escape this entrapment and encourage other men to do the same, the narrator establishes a brutal, violent, bare-knuckle "fight club" that meets underground to assert their primal aggression and masculinity through means of violence. *Invisible Monsters* followed *Fight Club*; this novel, also narrated in first person, features a former female model who has been tragically disfigured in a drive-by shooting. The protagonist, unable to speak due to the loss of her jaw, befriends a pre-operational transsexual. This particular work of Palahniuk's examines the fluidity of sexual identity and comments on how society regards the importance of outward beauty and the taboo of transsexuality and homosexuality. *Survivor*, Palahniuk's 1999 novel, centers on Tender Branson, the final member of a religious mass-suicide cult. Tender reflectively narrates his life, and consequently the novel, into the black box recorder of an airplane he has hijacked.

Survivor examines and openly mocks organized religions that definitively dismiss religious concepts that differ from those of their own. Each of Palahniuk's novels combine "violent surrealism" with "suspenseful noir" to depict characters who "find themselves raging against political, economic, and social systems" (Schuchardt 15). The dramatic irony that Palahniuk continually presents encourages readers to "feel the redemptive power of feminism, love, cooperation, harmony" and acceptance (Schuchardt 17). This is because Palahniuk's characters inhabit a world where these qualities are absurdly absent. Nonetheless, because of the intentionally obscene and vulgar language Palahniuk uses, the moral and metaphorical messages behind his works are often unobserved.

Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Rubin suggest that "Palahniuk's ability to intrigue and to unsettle the reader concurrently grants him a place in the American Gothic lineage" (Kuhn and Rubin 4). Indeed, Palahniuk can be categorized alongside writers such as "Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, Shirley Jackson, William Faulkner, and Toni Morrison."¹ Heidi Ashbaugh, author of "Chuck Palahniuk's *Diary*: American Horror, Gothic, and Beyond," also places Palahniuk in the realm of contemporary gothic literature. She examines Palahniuk's 2003 novel, *Diary*, and its heavy gothic influences. Ashbaugh ultimately concludes that Palahniuk's "blending of traditional conventions" with "new inversions" of "contemporary social issues" lead readers to study Palahniuk's *Diary* as both cult fiction and transgressional gothic

¹ Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Rubin list Palahniuk among these canonical authors, noting that like those who precede him, Palahniuk has "pushed beyond the borders of what was deemed acceptable into the downright shocking" (4).

literature. She argues, “we cannot dismiss Palahniuk’s [horror novels, *Diary*, *Lullaby*, and *Haunted*] as purely fantastic— they are too rooted in our everyday lives, yet they often reflect fears and limitations which are terrifying to contemplate” (Ashbaugh 143).

Ashbaugh’s argument, albeit true, should be pushed even further: all of Palahniuk’s works, not exclusively his horror novels, should be considered through a lens that focuses on contemporary societal limitations. Palahniuk’s works display underlying themes of “more modern, realistic horror, as well as aspects of a further adapted American Gothic” (Ashbaugh 143). Furthermore, Palahniuk’s novels and short stories alike “address issues of liminality within social settings,” and strive to prove that lack of social acceptance is perhaps more terrifying than any traditional gothic tragedy or villain. While Palahniuk’s content undoubtedly utilizes traditional gothic conventions, he adds extremity, irony, vulgarity, ridicule, and humor, in a way the gothic genre does not currently incorporate. Palahniuk’s texts are parodic, subliminally critiquing societal reactions to the conflicts outlined in each novel. The social restraints in Palahniuk’s works exist in our reality, but are frequently veiled to avoid criticism; Palahniuk criticizes the lack of acceptance within our society, suggesting that the real gothic monsters are among us.

In May 2015, Chuck Palahniuk released his first collection of short stories, titled *Make Something Up: Stories You Can’t Unread*. Immediately, the title of the collection suggests the nature of the work is nothing short of what Palahniuk readers would expect: dark, unorthodox plots that use irony, vulgarity, and humor to critique society.

“Inclinations,” a short story in the collection, is no exception. In “Inclinations,” an

unknown narrator recounts the story of Kevin Clayton, a sixteen-year-old who manipulatively convinces his parents he is gay. Before introducing Kevin, however, the narrator provides a brief backstory on Kevin's peer, Mindy Evelyn Taylor-Jackson. Mindy, at the early age of thirteen, became pregnant. Her parents, "born-again Pro-Lifers," persuade their daughter to carry the baby full term before giving it up for adoption (Palahniuk 255). As a reward for doing so, they agreed to buy her a Porsche. The narrator explains that Mindy took advantage of this situation, and "before her sixteenth birthday, she had... three Porsches and the biggest boobs in the junior class" (Palahniuk 256). Knowing that her parents would continue to reward her for not aborting an unwanted pregnancy, Mindy continues to get pregnant and reap the rewards. The narrator then introduced Kevin Clayton. Kevin, like Mindy, aims to be rewarded for what his parents consider undesirable and repulsive. Therefore, he pretends to be homosexual to be sent to an institution that enforces heterosexuality by giving him unlimited access to sexually available women. After asking for a subscription to *Elle Decor* magazine, Kevin asks for a gerbil. Days later, after the gerbil goes missing, Kevin asks for a replacement. In order to convince his parents of his faux-homosexuality, this pattern continues. Kevin also deliberately removes Vaseline from its container to make his parents believe he uses it as a lubricant for the gerbil as an erotic device.

Immediately, Palahniuk sets up this short story using a parody, and lampoons conservative society's gross characterization of homosexuality: homosexuals read *Elle Decor* and use gerbils as erotic devices. While others argue that Palahniuk creates these plots with the aim of being crude, it can be recognized that he uses such extreme

stereotypes to highlight the hysterical overreaction of Kevin's parents and society's potential perception of homosexuality. After Kevin stages his use of Vaseline as lubricant, his parents begin to record exactly how much Vaseline was being used "the same way they marked the bottles of vodka and gin in the liquor cabinet" (Palahniuk 256). Palahniuk juxtaposes the "deviance" of homosexuality with that of underage drinking. According to Kevin's parents, using lubrication for the sake of homosexual eroticism is just as severe as stealing liquor. Additionally, Palahniuk highlights Kevin's father's clichéd perception of homosexuality by creating stereotypically gay dialogue Kevin uses when conversing with his father. In order to further present himself as a homosexual, with offensively stereotypical homosexual interests, Kevin asks his father, "Be honest...Do you *really* think that vividly patterned foil wallpapers can rally for a comeback?" while referencing a photo in an interior design magazine (Palahniuk 257). After this interaction with his son, Kevin's father "shuddered and wiped his face with the palm on one hand" (Palahniuk 257). Palahniuk aims to depict and expose the homophobia often present in contemporary society by first presenting a heterosexual teenager's perception of homosexuality, then illustrating how his conservative, white, middle-class parents would react.

Homosexuality has been a conventional gothic trope in literature for centuries; Palahniuk, however, utilizes homosexuality in an untrodden way. George E. Haggerty explains that "transgressive social-sexual relations are the most basic common denominator of gothic writing" (Haggerty 2). He critiques the cultural perception of homosexuality by hyperbolizing it as well as conservative-culture's perception of

homosexuality. Palahniuk ironically parallels our society's anxieties about homosexuality with that of late-Victorian era: the Labouchère Amendment in 1885 made "sexual acts between men illegal and punishable by imprisonment" (Hogle 199). Similarly to the apprehensions experienced over a century ago, in "Inclinations," homosexuality isn't just "social-abnormality;" it's a deviance that your parents will send you away to "correct."

Kevin, eager to "measur[e] teenage power and parental love," manipulates his parents into sending him to a "rehab clinic" outside of town (Palahniuk 258-9). The narrator notes that the "big fenced-off building...only *looked* like a factory," and according to what Kevin has heard, "there was nothing to do inside except lift weights and get injections of testosterone" (Palahniuk 259). Palahniuk satirically illustrates the concept of creating what is considered the ideal, masculine, straight male inside a factory; in this factory that "corrects" homosexuality, transforming homosexual men into heterosexuals, they participated in stereotypically masculine recreations, such as lifting weights, "play[ing] cards, and surf[ing] porn" (Palahniuk 259). "Plus," the narrator notes in reference to the correction facility, "they brought in strippers and whores" (Palahniuk 259). In "Inclinations," Palahniuk not only satirizes how the gay community is perceived by others, but also critiques how contemporary society defines masculinity by illustrating a hyperbolic 'masculine therapy' to correct homosexuality. Kate E. Behr suggests that what "is socially feared can be embodied in a stereotype" in the gothic novel. These fears, although "recognized and labelled as fictitious" explore and depict the "darker, illogical areas of human experience" (Behr 52). Both the traditional gothic novel and Palahniuk's short story use societal stereotypes that have developed into a "widely recognized... fear"

(Behr 52). In this particular case, Palahniuk hyperbolizes the fear of being construed as a feminized male as opposed to the monolithic image of a straight, masculine man and embeds this fear within his text.

As discussed above, Palahniuk is most famous for his critique on damaged masculinity in his 1996 novel, *Fight Club*. Numerous critics have analyzed the role of masculinity in *Fight Club*, but it is rarely discussed in junction with Palahniuk's other works. Eduardo Mendieta recognizes that while "most, if not all, of Palahniuk's fiction is suffused with references, reflections, and dogged insistency on the constructedness of masculinity," *Fight Club* deliberately "deconstructs" American masculinity (Mendieta 46). In "Inclinations," however, Palahniuk uses masculinity to hyperbolically demonstrate what our society potentially expects from the traditional man: a heterosexual male who lifts weights, is injected with testosterone, watches pornography, is entertained by strippers, and finally, participates in an abundance of heterosexual sex. While Palahniuk advocates against hegemonic monolithic masculinity in *Fight Club* in a more obvious way, it should be recognized that he— although more subtly— also satirizes our resistance to various masculine identities in "Inclinations."

Furthermore, Palahniuk parodies the deviance and taboo of homosexuality in his description of the "Fag Farm," the unofficial name of the correctional facility Kevin attends. The narrator notes that the building was "built as someplace else— a hospital or a prison" (Palahiuk 260). The building that is now used to "reorient" homosexual teenagers once functioned to contain the ill or the criminal. The correctional facility, isolated by corn fields and iron gates, is heavily guarded by "roaming, bloodthirsty Stalag

13 dogs,” a fence with “accordion rolls of razor wire running along the top,” and “another fence with signs that read ‘Danger High Voltage’” (Palahniuk 260-1). Palahniuk critiques conservative society’s misunderstanding of homosexuality by sarcastically suggesting that homosexuals should be institutionalized, and approached with the same precautions as dangerous prisoners.

The theme of containment and isolation not only serves to satirize the deviance of homosexuality, but Palahniuk also uses it as a conventional gothic trope. According to Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy, the “exploration of location” in which the gothic takes place is a new area of academic study (Spooner 51). While readers are familiar with the traditional gothic settings such as “ancestral houses” and “decrepit castles,” critics aim to critique the “transformation that Gothic undergoes” when “transplanted” to other environments less standard in the gothic genre (Spooner 51). Since containment and isolation are conventions in gothic literature readers have seen before, Palahniuk’s hyperbolic “Fag Farm” could be considered a contemporary House of Usher— a chilling, isolated building in which the protagonist will eventually be trapped. Kevin’s imprisonment in the “Fag Farm” is significant in terms of the gothic novel on a secondary level as well. Not only is his containment a traditional gothic convention as seen in countless gothic tales preceding “Inclinations,” but Kevin’s entrapment also serves to condition him as the hero of this story. As Behr suggests, the imprisonment of a hero initiates “the painful trials of growth” (Behr 99)². Because Kevin is “removed from

² Readers may contest Kevin’s status as a hero— he does, after all, deceive his parents into thinking he was a homosexual who embodies offensive stereotypical qualities for reasons later revealed in the story. Kevin’s heroic identity will be discussed later in this essay.

society” he is therefore “forced toward inner reflection” and undergoes a transformation necessary for gothic heroes (Behr 99). Kevin must be imprisoned and isolated from ordinary society for his transformation to take place³.

Kevin soon discovers he is not alone in his plan to manipulate his parents by pretending to be a homosexual. Other boys assigned to his floor, Jasper, Brainard, Pig the Pirate, Tomas, Whale Jr., Troublemaker and Kidney Bean, immediately reveal their plans to “blackmail” their parents by pretending to be— according to their conservative community— deviant and gay. Furthermore, the boys are enthusiastic about the “treatment” they will receive to correct their homosexuality: endless heterosexual sex. Troublemaker, the first to confess, firmly admits, “talking slow, like a list of words instead of a sentence... ‘I — Am — Not — A — Homosexual’” (Palahniuk 263). The narrator continues to expose the plans of the other “inmates,” stating that Whale Jr. “hoodwinked his entire church,” into believing he was gay, and his parish was “holding bake sales” to support his “treatment” (Palahniuk 264). The narrator acknowledges that when Whale Jr. returns home, “he’d be a local hero,” and “The Rotary Club and Kiwanis would ride him down Main Street in a big Welcome Home parade” waving at everyone from the “boot of a Cadillac convertible” (Palahniuk 264). The narrating voice comments that Whale Jr. would be “living proof to everyone he knew that they could heal the corruption of this sick world...they were saving a soul” (Palahniuk 264). Again, Palahniuk uses this excessive homecoming celebration and the concept of being “cured”

³ For the purpose of keeping this essay organized chronologically according to Palahniuk’s short story, the concepts of containment and isolation in gothic literature will be expanded upon later in this essay. It is worth noting, however, that the theme of containment is continually developed throughout the story.

of homosexuality to highlight the overreaction of conservative society's potential perception of gay culture. Whale Jr. was not the only character scheming his community into believing he was a hero "cured" of homosexuality. Jasper's grandparents "promised to pay for his college education," and Pig the Pirate's "reward" was flying lessons (Palahniuk 264). Kevin Clayton, the protagonist, "would get no less than twenty thousand dollars cash" upon his graduation from the correctional facility (Palahniuk 265). Every boy on Kevin's floor was only pretending to be gay in order to earn an artificial reward from their conservative parents or community.

Not only does the satiric language and descriptions Palahniuk uses suggest that Kevin and the other boys at the "correctional facility" are prisoners as a result of their "corrupt" homosexuality, but the reader soon discovers that the boys are just beginning their contemporary gothic experience. After having first arrived to the "Fag Farm," Kevin and his comrades feel as if their plan to seemingly "achieve" heterosexuality by watching porn, lifting weights, and participating in other generally hyper-masculine activities is sure to succeed. What they did not consider, however, was the possibility that these rumors regarding their homosexuality "treatment" were false. The Commander, the facility's headmaster, also referred to as Mr. Peanut behind his back, welcomes the boys into the "Healing Center," and assures the boys that "the institution has never failed in its mission" to correct "deviant homosexuality" or "released a soul with troubled inclinations back into the world" (Palahniuk 266). The Commander explains to the boys how they will be "retained" until "declared... fully reoriented"; they will shower separately, dress in isolation, and never see each other unclothed to "avoid temptations of

the flesh” (Palahniuk 266). The Commander also advises the boys, for their “own safety,” not to attempt to leave the building, and reminds them of the electric fences and dogs restricting them from the outside world. The narrator informs readers that while listening to the Commander, “Kevin fought off a feeling of cold dread,” and that while “it wasn’t the words the Commander said that spooked” Kevin, it was as if the Commander was “a judge decreeing a death sentence” (Palahniuk 266-7). It is at this point that Kevin first begins to reconsider his scheme.

After the Commander’s welcoming address, the boys ask about the rumored treatments to correct their homosexuality. They boys inquire about “the steroids” and “weight lifting,” but “no one dared to ask about the promise of whores and strippers as part of their reconditioning” (Palahniuk 267). The Commander, confused, informs the boys that “despite whatever rumors they’d heard, there would be no anabolic steroids or bodybuilding” (Palahniuk 268). Before the Commander departs and dismisses the boys, Kevin’s fellow inmate, Troublemaker, asks when the boys will “hook up with Betsey” (Palahniuk 268). After this inquiry, the Commander smiles; the narrator describes the Commander’s smile as “not a happy smile,” but rather “the smile of someone keeping a secret” (Palahniuk 268). Betsey, according to the Commander, will “grant” the boys “access to all the erotic mysteries of the female body,” to cure them of their homosexuality (Palahniuk 268). Although he is able to articulate Betsy’s function, the Commander is unable to describe Betsey’s identity to the boys, but to “demonstrate what mere words couldn’t convey,” he molds “a curvy, hourglass shape in the air” (Palahniuk 268).

The following day, the boys are escorted to the basement of the facility to meet Betsey. The narrator tells the readers that the boys had been awake most of the night, “whispering the name,” and as they moved toward their anticipated treatment, the boys felt as if they “were being buried alive” (Palahniuk 269). The narrator also notes that the boys were told by the Commander to dress “as if they were attending a formal dance,” and while they “tied their neckties and shined their shoes, the girl’s name had haunted them” (Palahniuk 269). As the story continues, Palahniuk begins to use unmistakably gothic language and tropes. He—or rather, the narrator— writes that as Kevin approached this “blind date” with Betsey, he was “haunted” by “dread” (Palahniuk 270). Kevin tells himself that “whatever the conditions,” if he “could have sex with this stranger he’d be phoning his parents to come get him [from the correctional facility] tomorrow” (Palahniuk 270). The idea of heterosexual sex with strangers that Kevin and the other teenage boys once anticipated now “haunts” them. Ironically, the boys entered the “Fag Farm” pretending to be unsettled by the idea of intercourse with a female. Now, on the brink of what they once wanted, they are genuinely unnerved at the idea of such sexual relations. The narrator expresses Kevin’s anxieties and states that the boys were lead down farther than the basement: “Dungeon deep. Torture chamber deep” (Palahniuk 270). These phrases describing traditionally gothic settings foreshadow the fate of both Betsey and the boys. Finally, Kevin and his companions reach the room in which they will meet the mysterious “Betsey.” The narrator reports that the room was “dim” and “cold as a vault... [Kevin] could smell perfume mixed with chemicals that made his eyes sting...He stood under the room’s one light, surrounded by darkness” (Palahniuk 270-1).

The Commander, after addressing Kevin and the boys, grips the edge of “a greasy sheet of milky plastic,” and uncovers Betsey (Palahniuk 271).

Under the sheet the boys see what the narrator refers to as “the thing” (Palahniuk 271). Its “skin looked as white as soap” and “Kevin prayed it was merely a life-sized dummy” (Palahniuk 271). The narrator reports that cloth bandages wrapped Betsey’s wrists and neck. Black stitches “showed where the thing’s pale skin had been sliced open and sutured back together” (Palahniuk 272). Indeed, this figure the Commander could not find words to describe was the corpse of a teenage girl — and she was intended to help the boys discover “all the erotic mysteries of the female body,” and cure them of their homosexuality. The narrator continues to describe “the Betsey thing,” noting that she had been “[b]utchered by too many boys to keep track of,” when the Commander assures the boys, “you need not be terrified of women” (Palahniuk 272). Obviously, it is not *women* the boys are terrified of, but rather the necrophilic implications of the Commander.

Female sexuality, though in many instances in a different context, is yet another traditional gothic trope that Palahniuk utilizes in this short story. Alison Milbank and Markman Ellis discuss female sexuality in the gothic text and consider the significance of femininity in relation to the gothic text. Both authors remind readers that gothic fiction arrived in the modern scholarly conversation in the 1970s and 80s (Milbank 155).

Milbank states that because the rise of gothic fiction coincided with the second wave of feminism, and criticism was “often driven by feminist concerns,” gothic female readership was and remains well-established. Furthermore, it is noted that since the rise of gothic criticism, it became evident that the specific sub-genre “female gothic” was

actively developing. Although women have always been quite prominent in novel writing, Milbank notes that an overwhelming number of specifically gothic writers are female (Milbank 156). Ellis suggests that this is because gothic fiction has both a literary and political worth that often highlights that “bitter debate about the nature and politics of femininity” (Ellis 48). That is not to suggest that Palahniuk’s “Inclinations” focuses exclusively on the political issues of femininity, or masculinity for that matter. Palahniuk does, however, use subtle details to perhaps critique our understanding of both of these concepts.

As the narrator continues to describe Betsey, he comments that she was wearing false eyelashes and “sparkle-pink-painted fake fingernails glued on top of her ragged real nails” (Palahniuk 273). Troublemaker remarks that sending her to the correctional facility for the use of repetitive sexual violation is her “parents’ revenge” (Palahniuk 273). The narrator, however, believes that Troublemaker is referring to the rather cliché feminine accessories, suggesting that being defined as a woman only in terms of sparkly pink nail polish and false eyelashes is a violation equally severe as necrophilic rape. This assumption regarding Betsey’s feminine identity according to her accessories proves incorrect. Readers learn much later in “Inclinations” that the reason Betsey’s body was donated to the correctional facility as part of her “parents’ revenge” is because she was, before her death, a lesbian. The Commander tells the boys that Betsey “sinned too many ways for God to want her anymore” and that her parents had “donated her body to the clinic because they’d wanted to redeem her deviant soul” (Palahniuk 286). It is not until even later in the story that Troublemaker’s identity is revealed: Troublemaker is a girl

disguised as a homosexual boy, infiltrating the facility to save her girlfriend's corpse, who was once called "Suede" (Palahniuk 283). The irony in this, of course, is the fact that Troublemaker is the only homosexual amongst a group of heterosexual boys who are posing as homosexuals. Furthermore, it was Troublemaker who first declared to the boys upon arrival to the correctional facility that she was "Not—A—Homosexual" (Palahniuk 263). Again, Palahniuk's satirical illustration of conservative society's reaction to homosexuality cannot be ignored. However, acknowledging this use of satire is not enough; it is critical to recognize how the "deviance" of homosexuality acts as a conventional gothic trope.

In order to understand why Palahniuk uses homosexuality as a gothic trope in "Inclinations," readers must recognize why any gothic author used homosexuality, or any transgressive social-sexual undertone in his or her writing. It is important to acknowledge that the development of gothic fiction, which emerged rather abruptly in the late eighteenth century, occurred during a period that, according to Haggerty, "had yet to construct the elaborate superstructure of sexuality" (Haggerty 3). This foundational understanding of sexuality derived in the age of sexology—the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Therefore, we must consider the ways in which gothic fiction helped "shape thinking about sexual matters" and how it continues to do so (Haggerty 3). Indeed, Palahniuk's "Inclinations," much like the gothic works that precede it, serves as a gothic short story that aims to critique how twenty-first century society approaches sexuality and homosexuality.

Additionally, Haggerty notes that it “is no mere coincidence that the cult of gothic fiction reached its apex at the very moment when gender and sexuality were beginning to be codified for modern culture” (Haggerty 2). In fact, according to Haggerty, gothic fiction “offered a testing ground for many unauthorized genders and sexualities” including but not limited to, sodomy, pedophilia, sadism, tribadism, “romantic friendship,” incest, masochism, necrophilia, cannibalism, miscegenation, masculinized females, feminized males, and so on (Haggerty 2). It is undeniable that sexuality plays a pronounced role in gothic literature, and the existing boundaries of sexual relations are continually challenged in gothic writing. Therefore, it is no surprise that Palahniuk, like so many gothic writers before him, utilizes contemporary society’s anxieties regarding sexuality, more specifically, homosexuality, to create his modern-day gothic “monster.” The monster in Palahniuk’s “Inclinations” is the lack of acceptance within our society.

Palahniuk continues his critique on society’s perception of homosexuality when he describes other means of corrective treatment for the boys. The evening of their first experience with Betsey, the prisoners of the “Fag Farm” are forced to drink a chocolate milkshake “spiked with syrup of ipecac” and left to watch *Steel Magnolias* (Palahniuk 274). The implied purpose of this theory is to create a negative emetic connotation with a film typically associated with femininity.⁴ The narrator also reports that Kevin receives a series of letters from his mother, mostly “scribbled...in ‘Get Well’ cards, describing how [Kevin’s] father had collapsed from overwork” attempting to keep up with the clinic’s weekly charges. Kevin’s mother tells her son that his father had a “*cardiac episode*, but

⁴ Again, readers see the satire Palahniuk uses to illustrate contemporary, conservative society’s discomfort with the feminized male.

implied that it was akin to a broken heart” (Palahniuk 275). Once again, the implications that Kevin’s homosexuality can be “cured,” and the fact that his “condition” breaks his father’s heart, is a clear parody of conservative society’s reactions to homosexuality.

Despite the fact that a large portion of this essay has been dedicated to discussing sexuality/homosexuality in gothic literature, it is imperative to acknowledge that transgressive social-sexual relations is not the only gothic trope Palahniuk utilizes, nor is it exclusively what defines his work as gothic. As mentioned previously, containment/imprisonment is another motif that appears in countless gothic novels and short stories, and “Inclinations” is no exception. During their stay at the clinic, Kevin and the other sixth-floor boys being “treated” make an eerie observation— they are segregated from the “mobs imprisoned” at the clinic (Palahniuk 276). Kevin and the other inmates on his floor, however, can see the other patients outside on the basketball court. Kevin notes that these boys look “broken-down. Their ankles showed below the frayed hems of their pant legs... It looked as if they’d outgrown their clothes. As if these too-tight T-shirts and jeans worn out at the knees were clothes they’d brought here at least a year before” (Palahniuk 276). Eventually, Kevin and his comrades conclude that “Nobody was ever discharged from the clinic. Not for years and years. It was only when a boy turned eighteen that he might be declared officially redeemed” (Palahniuk 276). The boys shooting hoops, Kevin later discovers, were “admitted [to the clinic] when they were thirteen, even twelve years old” (Palahniuk 277). The boys at the “Fag Farm” have been there, and possibly will be there, for years.

Behr argues that imprisonment in the gothic novel is accompanied by an additional challenge the gothic hero must frequently overcome: the gothic hero's "entanglement in the affections of an older woman" (Behr 96). According to Behr, the relationship between a gothic hero and an older woman highlights "both the attractiveness and the youth of the hero figure," who is "still learning how to control his passions" (Behr 96). Kevin, our "hero," as Behr would identify him, is sixteen. For the majority of the story, there is an obvious lack of an "older woman" who makes sexual advances on said hero; Kevin is, after all, in an all-boys homosexual correctional facility. Readers eventually learn, however, that there has indeed been an older woman with a sexual presence in Kevin's life: Mindy Evelyn Taylor-Jackson, the girl from Kevin's school who had carried her multiple babies full term in exchange for multiple Porsches from her "born again Pro-life" parents (Palahniuk 255). In fact, as Kevin admits to *Troublemaker*, "one of [Mindy's] babies" is his. "At least one," Kevin insists (Palahniuk 286). With that being said, Behr's argument regarding the significance of an older woman's sexual advances on a gothic hero— despite the fact that Mindy is only a year or so older than Kevin— is applicable. Behr suggests that the "motifs of sexuality and imprisonment reflect stages in the development of the hero character" (Behr 99). According to Behr, "both place the hero in a *passive* role;" in neither case, as Behr points out, "is the hero allowed to remain passive" or "feminized" though (Behr 99). The hero, Kevin, must "demonstrate his activity" by "literally breaking out of jail" (Behr 99). Although Kevin is not in an actual jail, he is imprisoned in the correctional facility with the other boys posing as homosexuals. Similarly, he cannot remain "feminized"; if he

aims to escape the “Fag Farm,” he must conform to the monolithic, heterosexual, masculine ideals the Commander demands from his “patients.”

In addition to the gothic tropes such as transgressive sexuality and imprisonment in Palahniuk’s “Inclinations,” there is yet another element that proves to be perhaps the most obviously gothic in this short story. Betsey, formally known as ‘Suede,’ has been donated to the “Fag Farm” to help reorient the homosexual boys. It is made obvious in the text that she is dead, and has been, as mentioned previously, “sliced open and sutured back together” with black stitches, “like the seams on a baseball” (Palahniuk 272). The narrating voice reports that, “some cuts looked fresh,” and the “Betsey thing” looked as if she had “been taken apart too many times to count. Butchered by too many boys to keep track of” (Palahniuk 272). Several gothic elements, such as the female body as gothic, cannot be ignored when considering the Suede or “Betsey thing,” as she is most frequently called in Palahniuk’s piece. Barbara Creed observes the fact that while “the horror film is populated by female monsters,” or “monstrous-feminine,” the critical work on “woman-as-monster” has been “neglected in feminist theory and in virtually all significant theoretical analyses” (Creed 1). Emphasis has instead been placed on “woman as victim of the (mainly male) monster” (Creed 1). In Palahniuk’s short story, the “Betsey thing” plays two roles. She is the monster, or a figure that unsettles the boys, and the victim: a female body that is repeatedly raped and tortured because of her sexual orientation when she was alive.

Betsey also embodies the gothic element of death/the dead body. Creed points out that “the corpse is constructed as the abject of virtually all horror” (Creed 11). Likewise,

Spooner argues that “contemporary gothic is more obsessed with bodies than in any of its previous phases: bodies become spectacle, provoking disgust, modified, reconstructed and artificially augmented” (Spooner 63). The “Betsey thing” does indeed provoke “disgust” amongst Kevin and his comrades, and it is quite literally “modified” and “reconstructed.” “Inclinations,” like countless other horror stories, utilizes the presence of a corpse to further illustrate its gothic identity.

The final unmistakably gothic element in Palahniuk’s “Inclinations” is without a doubt the grim ending to a suspenseful climax. Kevin, Troublemaker, and the rest of the boys on the sixth floor craft an escape plan that ultimately fails. In an effort to rescue the corpse of her girlfriend, Troublemaker is electrocuted by the fence, and experiences severe brain damage. To “preserve her secret” identity as a female posing as a male in the correctional facility, Kevin must help Troublemaker use the restroom. Kevin, after tearing off a few pieces of toilet paper, assists Troublemaker after she finishes relieving herself. As he does this, he notices that someone, the Commander or perhaps a floor guard, had discovered that Troublemaker was not a boy. The toilet paper “collected a cloudy gunk” that resembled the “same murky, viscous spunk,” the boys found inside Betsey (Palahniuk 305). Troublemaker had been raped. Hagerty argues that the concept of “powerlessness” in a sexual situation helps shape the “odd sexual mood in most gothic works” (Hagerty 2). In fact, the majority of gothic fictions seem to possess underlying sexual tones that encourage readers to consider the way gothic literature shapes issues of dark sexual matters such as rape or sadomasochism.

The story jumps forward to the day Betsey is replaced. The Commander announces to the boys that “the bereft parents of a new girl had donated her physical vessel”; this girl had died in a car accident (Palahniuk 307). It is slowly revealed that the new corpse, who, according to the Commander was “promiscuous,” is the body of Mindy Taylor-Jackson, Kevin’s girlfriend. The Commander demands Kevin to take the scalpel and make the first incision in this new body— Kevin refuses. The Commander guides Troublemaker to the table, places the knife in her hand, and orders her to remove the left breast. It is implied that instead of following his orders, Troublemaker kills the Commander with the scalpel.

The ending of “Inclinations” appears to be a joyous conclusion to an otherwise gothic story— the villain, so to speak, has been killed. However, the classification of a “happy ending” is not entirely accurate. Kevin and the other boys on the floor give false confessions to the murder of the Commander and therefore go to jail. With that being said, Troublemaker, the only truly “deviant”⁵ teenager in the correctional facility, does not go to prison. Indeed, this ending is complicated; is it triumphant because the boys escaped the “Fag Farm” and Troublemaker claims her status as a hero? Or is it gruesome because Kevin lost his love, and he and the otherwise innocent boys will spend the remainder of their lives in a different form of disciplinary containment? Spooner argues that “in Gothic texts... the past is a site of terror, of an injustice that must be resolved (Spooner 18). This ending is the resolution of the injustice Palahniuk develops throughout his short story. He continually illustrates offensive stereotypes and

⁵ I use the word “deviant” in reference to how Palahniuk portrays conservative culture’s perception of homosexuals.

perceptions by satirizing how conservative society views homosexuals. In the beginning of “Inclinations,” the “deviance” of homosexuality is hyperbolized as Palahniuk critiques society’s misconceptions of homosexuality by satirically suggesting that homosexuals be institutionalized and treated like dangerous prisoners. Ironically, the only *non*-prisoner at the end of the story is Troublemaker, a genuine homosexual.

When discussing his goals for future works, Palahniuk said, “I’d really love to come up with some metaphors that nail some social issues that we’re too frightened to talk about” (Keesey 50). As we consider Palahniuk a gothic writer, we can more clearly see how he explicitly aims to critique the society around us by unsettling readers and encouraging them to evaluate social limitations of a specific time. Critics recognize that his hyperbolic and satirical works subvert underlying themes of contemporary, realistic horror that exists in our society today. “Inclinations” stands as only one of many of Palahniuk’s contemporary gothic fictions that address these horrors, suggesting that the veiled social restraints outlined in his novels and short stories are more horrific than any gothic monster or villain; the lack of acceptance within our society proves the most fearful.

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