



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN-SOCIAL SCIENCE: A  
ARTS, HUMANITIES & PSYCHOLOGY  
Volume 14 Issue 1 Version 1.0 Year 2014  
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal  
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)  
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

## Chuck Palahniuck's *Fight Club* Apropos of Sartre's Bad Faith and Camus's Calculated Culpability

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*GJHSS-A Classification : FOR Code: 220399*



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# Chuck Palahniuck's *Fight Club* Apropos of Sartre's Bad Faith and Camus's Calculated Culpability

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Sex, drugs, violence, mayhem—Chuck Palahniuck's *Fight Club* has all of this and more. To pick up this book and give it a cursory reading is like taking a quick glimpse of daVinci's Mona Lisa in the Louvre, immediately exiting the museum, descending to the Paris Metro, and getting lost among the revolving turnstiles, insistent trains, and meandering people. Like the Mona Lisa, the novel is that compelling and has much to offer readers, critics, teachers, and philosophers alike who possess a keen desire for urgent and critical inquiry. In fact, much has been written about the existential philosophy that exists in Chuck Palahniuck's first novel *Fight Club* (1996). Surprisingly, there has been little discussion of this novel's connection to Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of the look and the three patterns of bad faith in *Being and Nothingness* nor of Camus's discussion of calculated culpability in *The Just Assassins*; this has largely been overlooked and presents a creative opportunity to better interpret *Fight Club* and its concomitant existential analysis, not to mention the interpretive territory of existentialist humor.

In brief, *Fight Club* is a novel about an unnamed narrator, and the novel's first chapter lets us know immediately what is happening since it starts at the end of the story: the narrator and Tyler Durden, the narrator's alter ego, are quarrelling and fighting while explosives are set to blow up the Parker-Morris Building. The narrator states, "This is about *property* as in *ownership*"

(14), then goes on to say, "I remember everything" (15).<sup>1</sup> We later learn as we continue to peruse the novel that the narrator is an unconfident and despairing man who suffers from insomnia. Seeking medical advice for his affliction, his unsympathetic doctor suggests that he exercise more, chew valerian root, and go to support groups for people who are dying of other maladies that are far worse than his own. While at the Remaining Men Together support group, his radical incompleteness prods him to hug Big Bob whereby the narrator cries, and this enables him to inevitably sleep. While embracing Big Bob (a cancer survivor who has had his testicles removed) at the aforementioned support group, he meets Marla Singer who becomes a mediating figure in his life. Unfortunately, the narrator "can't cry with this woman watching . . ." (22). Marla is constantly staring at him and "rolling her eyes"; in effect, he sees himself through her stultifying gaze as a "liar" and a "faker." This creates his shame and his inability to sleep once again.

Interestingly, Sartre's chapter on "The Look" in *Being and Nothingness* with the keyhole section proves noteworthy to explain the above situation: "Let us imagine that moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole. I am alone and on the level of a non-thetic self-consciousness" (259). Sartre contends that the pre-reflective cogito (non-thetic consciousness or non-positional self-consciousness) is at work here when an object or spectacle is being observed; however, what happens when this person suddenly becomes aware of himself/herself as being seen when footsteps are heard in the hall? "Someone is looking at me!" (260). At this juncture, the emotion of shame springs forth in Sartre's existential critique because the pre-reflective cogito of looking through a keyhole without being seen is changed to reflective consciousness upon being seen: "Nevertheless I am *that* Ego; I do not reject it as a strange image, but it is present to me as a self which I *am* without *knowing* it: for I discover it in shame and, in other instances, in pride. It is shame or pride which reveals to me the Other's look and myself at the end of that look" (261). Sartre further stipulates that "shame . . . is shame of *self*: it is the recognition of the fact that I am

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<sup>1</sup> Chuck Palahniuck, *Fight Club* (New York: Norton, 1996) 15. In further references to this work, I will use page numbers only.

indeed the object which the other is looking at and judging. I can be ashamed only as my freedom escapes me in order to become a given object" (261).

This philosophical concept lends credence to the narrator's sense of shame in that his radical autonomy has escaped him due to Marla's condemning gaze, and he has become a spurious object—a liar and a faker—for her. Likewise, this becomes the narrator's existential dilemma. It was initiated when the narrator couldn't sleep and was told by a doctor that his insomnia was "just the symptom of something larger" (19). This unwanted largesse is the narrator's alienation—something nobody can fully escape. However, the narrator attempts an escape by going to support groups and seeing people who are worse off than he. His alienation becomes manifest in the group introductions because he "never gives [his] real name" (23), nor is his real name given in the novel other than his fictionalized self of Tyler Durden.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, when the narrator is aware of being looked at by Marla, he becomes aware that he is a character and has a specific nature: his attendance at the support groups and not having any particular disease other than his *dis-ease* [my emphasis] of alienation.

The narrator's alienated condition is tantamount to Sartre's notion in *Being and Nothingness* of the extent to which the narrator is alienated from the dimension of his being; this heralds his bad faith at this moment, or what "must be the being of man if he is to be capable of bad faith?" (55). The narrator cannot experience himself originally as a liar/faker: it is Marla who gives rise to this mode of his being because it is through her vitriolic look that he repositions himself as a faker/liar in terms of the dreadful shame he experiences: "To Marla I'm a fake. Since the second night I saw her, I can't sleep. Still I was the first fake, unless, maybe all these people are faking with their lesions and the coughs and tumors . . ." (23). Since the narrator refuses to acknowledge his transcendence, this creates his existential crisis and becomes the origin of his bad faith because he wears a mantle of superficial integrity. Marla's look alienates the narrator from his possibilities, annihilating his freedom.

It is also at this point that Tyler Durden pops into the picture in terms of a man and his sexual desire, and the two men become best of friends while a love triangle forms with Marla. The narrator states, "I want Tyler. Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants me" (14). We find out later the genesis of the narrator and Tyler's unusual union—it is no mistake that Tyler comes to life when the narrator is "asleep" at a "nude" beach because the words of

sleeping and nudity codify why Tyler comes to life. The narrator's exhilarating and troubling contact with Marla produces his libidinal energy, but he feels inadequate to woo this woman in his present state of insomnia and malaise.<sup>3</sup> "If I could wake up in a different place, at a different time, could I wake up as a different person?" (33). At this point, the fervent narrator must certainly feel the physical need for sex since Tyler initially appears "naked" and "sweating," and this lends support to the notion that the narrator feels emasculated (hugging Big Bob at the support group) and bored (a "slave to [his] nesting instinct" in his condo). Along the Sartrean lines of shame, Kevin Boon makes the argument that the narrator has become "feminized"—feels "shame" (268) for not engaging in "traditional male behaviors"—and "Tyler Durden is the animus, the male within the feminized narrator. He surfaces to guide the narrator back toward his masculine legacy" (271-72). The narrator tells Marla, "The first time I met Tyler, I was asleep. I was tired and crazy and rushed . . . 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" (172). Altering his temporality because of his boredom and ineffectiveness as a traditional male, the narrator's existential encounter with Marla's look creates his bad faith and, in turn, Tyler—a way to extricate himself from reality and indulge his libidinal fantasy with Marla. Additionally, her last name is Singer and suggests the mythological and sexual import of the sirens in Homer's *Odyssey*.

Specifically, Sartre's patterns of bad faith provide a solid heuristic structure to interpret *Fight Club* at this point since the narrator's insomnia (malaise) is simply an existential metaphor for his bad faith, and this creates his alter ego. Sartre's first example in *Being and Nothingness* of a woman on a date becomes integral to this text since Tyler is everything the narrator is not. Tyler is virile, clever, fearless, and attractive, while the narrator is weak, inept, dull, and average: "Tyler is capable and free, and I am not" (117). The narrator seeks transcendence from his facticity (his body, past, and environment) and his "single-serving life." In short, Tyler is the narrator's "desire to surpass his existential limitation and to transform his being" (Ng 117).

The woman on the date in *Being and Nothingness* (55) knows the man's intentions and sexual desires, especially with his phrase, "I find you so

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Sertain also shares this view in footnote #3 in his essay when he says that "the narrator begins referring to himself in the third person with the name Joe. In actuality . . . only the alternate personality, Tyler Durden, is ever named explicitly. "'Even the Mona Lisa's Falling Apart': The Cultural Assimilation of Scientific Epistemologies in Palahniuk's Fiction," Grayson 43.

<sup>3</sup> Once again, Jeffrey Sertain (43) shares this view in footnote #4 in his essay when he states, "The alternate personality of Tyler Durden seems to have surfaced as a response to the presence of Marla Singer. Tyler is a way for Joe to deal with his attraction to Marla Singer because he is unable to initiate any sort of adult relationship with her." However, Nicola Rehling suggests that "the narrator created Tyler to overcome his longing for other men and to allow him to sleep with women, *Fight Club Takes a Beating: Masculinity, Masochism and the Politics of Disavowal*." *Gamma: Journal of Theory and Criticism* 9 (2001): 198.

attractive," but she does not know what she really wants. The man then takes her hand, and she tries to pretend she is all intellect; her hand rests "inert" between the man's hands—she doesn't consent nor resist—and her hand is now "a thing." Likewise in *Fight Club*, Marla, because of her radical incompleteness, does not know what she wants, and is "afraid to commit to the wrong thing so she won't commit to anything" (61). By extension, Marla inevitably leaves her hand between the hand of her companion, Tyler Durden, in order to flirt, to turn herself into a sex object, and to be sexually possessed: ". . . Tyler's sitting here covered in hickies and says Marla is some twisted bitch" (59). Tyler is a way for the narrator to come to terms with his attraction to Marla because he is incapable of initiating any authentic adult relationship with her other than sex. This, too, is a characteristic signature of his bad faith, stemming from his shame as a liar/faker due to Marla's potent gaze, and he attempts to combat her look with brute sex since she is his object of desire.<sup>4</sup> The narrator is attempting to multiply (sexual love) what he cannot unify (caring and tender love). Like Chloe, who is close to death because of brain parasites, he only wants sex, "not intimacy."

Marla's presence helps create the narrator's alter ego because the first time the narrator meets Tyler is at a nude beach. Stripped of clothing, Tyler is creating a giant hand out of logs to cast a perfect shadow; hence, this hand in *Fight Club* relates to the aforementioned hand in *Being and Nothingness* and by analogy the desire of the narrator for Marla. Tyler sits in the shadow to have what he considers a perfect moment.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the nude beach scene, Tyler, and Marla are inextricably connected.<sup>6</sup> The hand is an

<sup>4</sup> Hazel Barnes, the matriarch of existentialism because she translated Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and *Search for a Method* not to mention introducing the American public to existentialism in a series of ten public television programs broadcast in 1962, says in her book *The Story I Tell Myself* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997) that Sartre has three meanings of the look. The one presented so far comes from Sartre's objectifying look of "Hell is—other people" (45) in the play *No Exit* (New York: Vintage, 1989). Conversely, there are two positive aspects of the look that Barnes (76-77) discusses in relation to Sartre's work: "The Look-as-exchange" and "looking-at-the-world-together." These are the ones that the narrator fails to acknowledge throughout the majority of the novel until the very end.

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note here that Tyler's desire to create a perfect moment is similar to Anny and her search for perfect moments in Sartre's novel *Nausea*. Likewise, both Anny and Tyler and their search for perfect moments are indicative of their bad faith. Deborah Evans makes this point quite vivid in "Some of These Days: Roquentin's American Adventure," *Sartre Studies International: An International Journal of Existentialism and Contemporary Culture* 8.1 (2002) 63.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Mathews, Grayson 90, makes the comment that "the narrator first meets Marla immediately after his initial encounter with Tyler at the beach." However, the problem I see here is that the time frame of this novel is convoluted at times through analepsis and prolepsis, and it is impossible to say with any precision that this is true. All we know is that the nude beach scene happens in Chapter 3 and "Tyler meets Marla" in Chapter 7: the two are constantly "humping." Nevertheless,

important symbol in this novel to emphasize the initial struggle between the narrator and Tyler apropos of Marla. In the beautiful, liquid complexity of *Fight Club*, the narrator first wonders if Tyler and Marla are "the same person" because they are never in the same room together. The narrator only hears the sounds of their love making, and Tyler makes the narrator promise that he will never discuss their personal relationship with Marla, which becomes bad faith personified by the narrator in terms of Tyler. The narrator says, "I'm not talking to Marla. She can horn in on the support groups and Tyler, but there's no way she can be my friend" (66).

Later in Chapter 8, Tyler gives the narrator a chemical burn in the shape of a lip kiss on the back of his hand. This kiss on the "hand" names and positions Sartre's ontological philosophy because the chemical burn is made from lye. The word "lye" is a homophone for the other word "lie" or what one does in Sartre's notion of bad faith: lying to oneself and believing it or self-deception. Marla has this burn, too. She has tried to commit suicide, but before doing so has called Tyler who, in turn, calls the police. Marla, having second thoughts about the police, and Tyler surreptitiously leave her sleazy room at the Regent Hotel just as the cops arrive, and she vehemently shouts to the police that "the girl in 8G has no faith in herself . . . and she's worried that as she grows older, she'll have fewer and fewer options" (61). We learn that Marla steals "jeans out of the dryers" to support herself, and goes to the support groups to have a "real experience of death" since her job at a funeral home was unfulfilling in her profane world. "Funerals are nothing compared to this, Marla says. Funerals are all abstract ceremony" (38). Caught up in the sexual-ersatz relationship with Tyler, she wants to have his "abortion." Repositioning her ontological being, she becomes the narrator's accomplice in bad faith for she too is a liar/faker due to her suicidal, chaotic, and inauthentic actions.

The second example that Sartre (59) uses is the waiter in the café; his fervid movements, like an automaton, limit him to the role of a thing/a waiter or being-in-itself: "He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other; his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms; he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things." Sartre's waiter appears most appropriately in *Fight Club* as Tyler Durden since he is, indeed, a waiter at the Pressman Hotel, but he is a guerilla waiter who covertly urinates in the soup. This tainted soup later develops into other

the narrator dreams he is "humping Marla Singer. Marla Singer smoking her cigarette. Marla Singer rolling her eyes" (56). Subsequently, Tyler becomes manifest as the narrator's virile and sexy alter ego after he sees her at the support groups and she him—through the look—because the narrator lacks confidence in wooing this mysterious woman as his despairing, emasculated, and bored self. In bad faith, Tyler is the renewed image (opposite) of the narrator.

devious schemes—fight club and inevitably Project Mayhem. Tyler wants to abandon “money and property and knowledge,” so that he can lose everything to be “free to do anything” (70). In effect, Project Mayhem will attempt “to break up civilization,” so they can “make something better out of it” (208). Project Mayhem is a subversive aim to reform the fractious techno-industrial system from the inside: Tyler wants no government, no material wealth, no technology, and wants to destroy the buildings that contain the technology. Tyler’s avant-garde position to destroy the technological machines and the skyscrapers that contain them is a pristine example of Sartre’s notion of bad faith since Tyler wants to return to the past or the in-itself and says, “Imagine stalking elk through the damp canyon forests around Rockefeller Center” (199). Therefore, Tyler wants a futuristic devolution where technology and progress are shunned, so we can return to an Eden-like state. Tyler does not transcend the facticity of the past. Joseph Catalano explains this personal challenge in his interpretation of Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*: “[O]ne can be sincere in respect to the past, insofar as one admits having acted in a certain way. But to say I am lazy is to make laziness a structure, an in-itself. Man, however, is not identified with himself in the sense that an inkwell is an inkwell. If he were, bad faith would be impossible; he could never truly succeed in deceiving himself” (84).

Part of Tyler Durden’s manifestation as the narrator’s alter ego is linked to the narrator’s job: he is a “recall campaign coordinator” who hates his job and his itinerant existence since he must put a price tag on human life and suffering, and he also dislikes his fashionable, furnished condo since it only represents sterility due to consumerism and material possession. Morally challenged due to an unsettling cultural environment, Tyler destroys this building first. Furthermore, fiery violence becomes a means to regain lost virility and masculinity. Unfortunately, Tyler’s promise to the space monkeys or the members of fight club and Project Mayhem that help him so they will become free—they do his bidding and destroy buildings and technology—are only relinquishing their radical freedom in order to help Tyler and his dubious mission. Their nightly, orthodox readings to each other at the Paper St. house are highly indicative of their brain-washed behavior: “You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everyone else, and we are all part of the same compost pile” (134).

In brief, Tyler supplants the Other, and his megalomania “reaches its apex as he seeks not only to dismantle history but to replace it with a new order where his actions place him squarely in the role of God/Father” (Kennett 56). Accordingly, Tyler appears to be a modern Unabomber. The space monkeys are duped and objectified by Tyler to believe that there is a

“better time” awaiting them if they return to a past when men were important and significant, exemplified by their violent and destructive actions when overtaking a civilization. In contrast, the space monkeys simply become drones and conformists for Tyler who yearns to destroy science and technology. In terms of bad faith, Project Mayhem sees both the present and future as unproductive by those in the present; certainly, the past or being-in-itself seems more amenable and concrete because it is “full and complete.”<sup>7</sup> The paradox is created: Tyler and the space monkeys, through Project Mayhem, will destroy things—create a nothingness—in order to create their freedom. However, the dubious freedom that is created is one that Tyler chooses and inauthentic for the space monkeys since they must choose their own personal freedom—their existential challenge—without outside interference. It is no mistake that Tyler tells his pugilistic neophytes that the first and second rule of fight club is “you don’t talk about fight club” (48); in Project Mayhem the first and second rules are “you don’t ask questions” (122).

As stated before, the narrator is able to sleep after he cries and is embraced by Big Bob, “the big cheesebread,” who has had his testicles removed due to testicular cancer. Big Bob was a “juicer” who injected steroids to make himself look muscular; as a result he “owned a gym,” was on “television,” did “product endorsements,” and was “married three times” (21). Posing as Tyler, the narrator gets involved with Marla and starts fight club and Project Mayhem to boost his testosterone level and regain his castrated masculinity as well: “You see a guy come to fight club for the first time, and his ass is a loaf of white bread. You see this same guy here six months later, and he looks carved out of wood” (51). Turned into objects like wood or the in-itself, these men postulate that they are redeemed when they participate in fight club. Tyler tells them, “There’s grunting and noise at fight club like at the gym, but fight club isn’t about looking good. There’s hysterical shouting in tongues like at church, and when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved” (51).

At the end of the novel, the narrator, having moments of clarity in life’s ambiguous domain, is finally seeking authenticity and individuality and wants to shut down fight club. However, the contumacious space monkeys remember the rules: “You know the drill, Mr. Durden. . . . [I]f anyone ever tries to shut down the club, even you, then we have to get him by the nuts” (187). This touts the reason as to why the emasculated narrator cannot engage Marla sexually, but virile Tyler

<sup>7</sup> Barry Vacker, “Slugging Nothing,” *You Do Not Talk about Fight Club*, ed R. M. Schuchardt (Dallas: Benbella Books, Inc., 2008) 197. Vacker also uses Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* for his close analysis of *Fight Club* and the film it spawned. I quite agree when Vacker says that “perhaps the most radical implication for *Fight Club* will be found in Sartre’s theorization of the future as a ‘nothingness,’ the nothingness of possibilities facing and shaping humanity” (177).

can: "Tyler and I share the same body, and until now, I didn't know it. Whenever Tyler was having sex with Marla, I was asleep (174). In essence, this is Sartre's (63-64) third example of bad faith: the homosexual<sup>8</sup> who won't acknowledge his sexual inclination and its concomitant social relevance: "A homosexual frequently has an intolerable feeling of guilt, and his whole existence is determined in relation to this feeling . . . . The homosexual recognizes his faults . . . . He does not wish to be considered a thing." R.M. Schuchardt tells us in his article "A Copy of a Copy of a Copy" that *Fight Club's* popularity was due in large part to the exposition of "homosexual inclinations, predicated on the absent father and the domineering mother" (159). He bases this on Camille Paglia's "assessment that a large part of explaining the rise in male homosexuality in the last three decades can be directly attributed to the divorce rate and the subsequent rise in fatherlessness" (163). If this is true, then Nicola Rehling's supposition that "the narrator created Tyler to overcome his longing for other men and to allow him to sleep with women" smacks of veracity. Remember that Bob embraces the narrator, both cry, and the narrator can sleep afterwards (a metaphor for going to bed with another man); but he can't sleep once Marla sees them hugging and crying together. Through shame, the disillusioned narrator abnegates the pseudo-sexual relationship with Bob, and starts up with Marla as Tyler—he doesn't want to be considered a thing since the moral majority in our country views homosexuality as unproductive (can't produce offspring) and extremely dangerous (the AIDS epidemic in the gay community).

This will again team up with the urban terrorism of Tyler Durden and his ubiquitous creation of disenfranchised groups: "We are the middle children of history, raised by television to believe that someday we'll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won't" (166). Ultimately, the bad faith is stripped away towards the end of the novel because the narrator is seeking authenticity and individuality—to live in good faith. Feeling guilty, the narrator initially wants Marla to follow him around at night when Tyler is on the loose, so

<sup>8</sup> Robert A. Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus, "Hiding Homoeroticism in Plain View: The *Fight Club* DVD as Digital Closet." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19.1 (2002): 21-43, have written an excellent article on the movie *Fight Club* and the "homoerotic elements as representing homosexual experience" that is certainly worth reading even in terms of the novel since the book and film have many similarities. Furthermore, Chuck Palahniuck was gay but didn't want anybody to know this because it might devalue his work as a novelist. In fact, Palahniuck blasted *Entertainment Weekly* reporter Karen Valby on his "fan website, The Cult," fearing that she was going to expose him. See Jesse Kavaldo, "The Fiction of Self-destruction: Chuck Palahniuck, Closet Moralist," Grayson 5. Much to Palahniuck's chagrin, she didn't and he retracted his comments about her. Today, much like the narrator, Palahniuck is one of the most prolific authors of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and is loved by his fans, as observed on his website and the publication of his many novels.

the narrator "can rush around and undo the change" during the day (175). Nonetheless, Marla makes the narrator realize that he has killed Patrick Madden, the mayor's special envoy on recycling. Marla also asks, "[W]ho's going to kill me?" (196). Finally, the narrator comprehends that he actually likes Marla and tells her so. Her response is, "Not love?" And he retorts, "This is a cheesy enough moment, I say. Don't push it" (197). The cheesiness or bad faith of all that the narrator has done is now fully realized.

Ultimately, the narrator will decide to kill himself to atone for the deaths of Patrick Madden and Big Bob: he too becomes one of Project Mayhem's space monkeys. This symbolically becomes the feud between Sartre and Camus over the end justifying the means (Sartre) or vice versa (Camus) in terms of violent acts to empower the working class (the blue collar workers in *Fight Club* who represent the space monkeys because they carry out the acts of urban terrorism). This essentially is Sartre's political position in his play *Dirty Hands* (1948) versus that of Camus's position in his play *The Just Assassins* (1949).

In *Dirty Hands*, Hoederer tries to explain to his secretary Hugo (who is really an inexperienced assassin and intends to kill Hoederer for the good of the Communist party since they deem his political policy treacherous) that "all means are good when they're effective."<sup>9</sup> Conversely, Camus says that an observance of a doctrine of limits is necessary when it comes to killing innocent people to further a political ideology. In *The Just Assassins*, Kaliyev cannot throw the bomb to kill the Grand Duke because there are children in the carriage with him. Stepan, a fellow revolutionary, is upset because he adamantly believes that "thousands of Russian children will go on dying of starvation for years to come" because of Tsarist oppression.<sup>10</sup> Dora, essentially the mouthpiece for Camus's political ideology in this play, defends Kaliyev's decision when she states, "Open your eyes, Stepan, and try to realize that the group would lose all its driving force, were it to tolerate, even for a moment, the idea of children's being blown to pieces by our bombs" (256). She goes on to say that "even in destruction there's a right way—and there are limits" (258). In Camusian terms, specifically, suicide becomes the necessary choice for taking another person's life. At the end of the play, the Grand Duchess visits Kaliyev in prison and is willing to spare his life because she is compassionate and kind. However, Kaliyev wants to avoid the inauthenticity of

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Dirty Hands, No Exit and Three Other Plays*, trans. I. Abel (New York: Vintage International, 1989) 218. This play essentially sets up the division between Sartre and Camus's political ideology and will start the famous argument.

<sup>10</sup> Albert Camus, *The Just Assassins, Caligula and Three Other Plays*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1958) 256. I like Stuart Gilbert's translation of this play because in all my studies of French literature, he renders the best translations of Albert Camus's work.

being a murderer. He wholeheartedly accepts what he has done and will take responsibility for the murder: "Those who love each other today must die together if they wish to be reunited. In life they are parted—by injustice, sorrow, shame; by the evil that men do to others . . . by crimes. Living is agony, because life separates" (289-90).

This is where the final discussion as to a positive message exists in *Fight Club* because the narrator survives the suicide attempt, desires to make amends, and wants to start an authentic relationship with Marla and vice versa. In existentialist terms it is calculated culpability. Hazel Barnes (161) explains Camus's position, "I liked, too, his notion of 'calculated culpability,' . . . the idea that in recognizing the necessity of choosing the lesser evil, we must acknowledge that it is nevertheless evil and cannot be dissolved in the good." As the novel draws to a close, the narrator is in a mental institution with space monkeys walking by to give him food and medication; positioned marginally, they wish for Tyler Durden's return. Additionally, the narrator meets God and has a humorous conversation with him in which the basic tenets of existentialism are espoused as God sits behind his desk "taking notes on a pad," but "[y]ou can't teach God anything" (207). It is at this point that the first tenet of existentialist humor comes into play—historical irony—to make comparisons to other relevant historical events apropos of *Fight Club* and the existential challenges it presents.<sup>11</sup> Playfully possessed, human existence is absurd, because the absurd, by any common definition of the word, means incongruity or irony, which is also the key to some classic definitions of humor.<sup>12</sup>

Briefly stated, Sartre and Camus's quarrel was mostly political, then moved to a personal level. During WWII, Sartre and Camus were friends and part of the French Resistance. After WWII, Sartre reached for and conjured up not just a politically correct French future but a more oblique Communistic ideology set up by Russia whereas previously he had disliked Communism all the way back to 1944; in his play *Dirty Hands* (1948), he considered that the ends justifies the means in terms of violent acts because he wanted the French proletariat to combat their unsettled cultural and historical environment. Ronald Aronson explains that "it was less a matter of the 'correct reading' of *Dirty Hands* than of the attitudes each brought with him to the play. For Camus, sticking to principle and refusing to lie for the

sake of politics was inseparable from respecting people and loving them" (106). In contrast,

Sartre was willing to side with the Communist movement, in spite of the evils of the Soviet Union, because he saw it as the only real hope and political expression of the majority of France's workers. He criticized Camus for rejecting it without searching for an alternative. But Camus's critique of revolution was his critique of Communism: both were built on a fundamentally wrong and destructive approach to humans, history, and reality itself. (151)

Obviously, this dubious posture links Sartre to Tyler and Project Mayhem along with fight club. Sartre, by placing history above the individual in his blending and bending of individuals and social groups, will continue in bad faith: Sartre will now endorse, contrary to the absurd outlined in *Nausea*, history to dictate what the individual must strive to become; although Sartre began with personal contingency in *Nausea*, he forsook this for historical contingency and Marxism, especially in his *Critique of Dialectical Reasoning*. Sartre was providing a justification for Stalinism in potent philosophical terms. Nik Fox articulates in his book *The New Sartre* that the Cold War led Sartre to change his ideology from a personal level to a social one because of the political situation in France during the early 1950s: "The most significant event. . . was the frame-up and arrest in 1952 of the Communist leader, Jacques Duclos, by the French state which impelled Sartre toward a 'radical conversion' to communism and towards a hatred and disgust for his own class, the bourgeoisie. . . ." (115). This is highly ironic and absurd because Sartre—like Tyler living in bad faith by accepting violence to achieve his ends and yearning to return to the past—will renounce Communism by 1956.

In relation to the existentialist notion of the absurd, Camus will historically and ironically become the narrator in *Fight Club* because Camus "would not simplify human problems, as reactionaries and revolutionaries did, and embraced democracy as the 'least evil' system of government" (Aronson 104). Moreover, unlike Sartre, Camus did not embrace history to form a political agenda. Catherine Camus, his daughter, reiterates her father's tendentious position: "[I]deology must serve humanity, not the contrary. . . . He went so far as to say that the means used by totalitarian regimes destroyed any hope for a better world" (vi).

Once again, by extension, we can see that Camus (there was a personal quarrel in the early 1950s because Sartre condemned Camus, his politics, and his book *The Rebel*) is like the narrator in *Fight Club*: "A man is dead, I say. This game is over. It's not fun anymore" (178). Apropos of Sartre, Tyler trenchantly tells the narrator, "I'll still live my life while you're asleep, but if you fuck with me, if you chain yourself to the bed at

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed analysis of existentialist humor, see my article "Sartre and Camus: *Nausea* and Existentialist Humor." *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 1.1 (2006). Web.

<sup>12</sup> On this point, three notable authors and their books become relevant to this discussion: Max Eastman *The Sense of Humor* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921), Martin Esslin *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), and Wylie Sypher "The Meanings of Comedy." *Comedy* (New York: Doubleday, 1956).

night or take big doses of sleeping pills, then we'll be enemies. And I'll get your for it" (168). The narrator now comes to understand the contingency, tragedy, and brevity of fragile human life.

Camus won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957, which is the highest honor for a literary genius. This is certainly Camus's notion of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus* because Camus will transcend his facticity by becoming what he is not:

The feeling of the absurd is not, for all that, the notion of the absurd. It lays the foundation for it, and that is all. It is not limited to that notion, except in the brief moment when it passes judgment on the universe. Subsequently it has a chance of going further. It is alive; in other words, it must die or reverberate. (28)

Elsewhere, Camus's *The Fall* is a covert reference to the conflict between Sartre and Camus: it is mostly brutal and vicious, yet ironically funny with all the allusions to their past conflict: Hence, "by temperament the one was primarily a philosopher [Sartre], absorbed with theories and general ideas, the other [Camus] primarily a novelist most comfortably capturing concrete situations" (Aronson 16). Camus has the last laugh through historical irony because he creates a novel (*The Fall*) about the fight (the title *Fight Club* in many ways mirrors the Sartre and Camus quarrel) to justify his side—it also helps him to win the Nobel Prize. In retrospect, it's too bad that both men died before the early 1990s: the fall of Communism in the Soviet Union would have been tantamount to Camus experiencing the ultimate in existentialist humor because Camus was right to say that democracy and capitalism were evils, but the lesser of the evils when compared to Soviet Communism.

After WWII, Camus's work connected him to the existentialists because of his philosophy of the absurd, his moralistic and constructive pessimism, and his alienated person in his novels and plays; however, he disavowed any such classification in a personal interview that he had with Jeanine Delpech, part of which appeared in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* in 1945 (1+). According to the basic tenet of existentialist humor, Camus was an existentialist because of his philosophy of the absurd in *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, not to mention his constructive moral humanism and his emphasis upon existence over essence in his other works—he is linked to Sartre and the existentialists once again. Camus praised Sartre's novel *Nausea*, yet condemned Sartre's politics. Sartre and Camus were close friends in WWII, but Camus later regretted their friendship since they were locked together as adversaries after Camus published *The Rebel*. Conversely, Sartre thought Camus to be one of his best friends in life. The powerful and distinctive shape of these two men's literature and their relationship

certainly exemplifies existentialist humor because Tyler and the narrator seem to become the prodigal heirs of Sartre and Camus.

It is at this point that the tenet of existentialist humor becomes heightened and grounds for interpretive territory since *Fight Club* was published in 1996 and the 9/11 tragedy happened in 2001. Thus, Palahniuck's novel was certainly prophetic. The *AIM Report* explains that both the CIA and the FBI found out that Osama bin Laden was plotting to hijack U.S. commercial jetliners to use as weapons to destroy strategic targets in the U.S.; this evil scheme was called Project Bojinka (Irvine), not unlike Project Mayhem in *Fight Club*. This plan was discovered in the Philippines in 1995 when police arrested Ramzi Yousef and Abdul Murad, the two men who were also instrumental in bombing the World Trade Center in 1993. These ruthless terrorists planned to blow up a Philippine airliner; authorities found Murad's laptop, and it contained plans for hiding and detonating bombs on several commercial jets in the U.S., not to mention hijacking other planes to crash into strategic American targets (especially national landmarks) kamikaze style in an unprecedented plurality.

Al-Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden certainly had a victorious laugh when the Twin Towers came down and another plane crashed into the Pentagon. Much like Palahniuck's novel, Tyler explains that "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 culture" (149); bin Laden, in turn, called for a holy war against the U.S. because of our political and profane alliance with Israel. How ironic that the people at the flight schools in the U.S. didn't find it strange that foreign students from the Middle East wanted to take flying lessons to pilot commercial airliners, especially in flight simulators, but were not that interested in learning how to land or take off. The *AIM Report* also explains that before 9/11, "foreigners, including many from the Middle East," targeted flight schools for their vocational training in the U.S because visas were given almost "automatically to those who applied to these schools"; it was "especially easy for those with Saudi Arabian passports" because "at Huffman Aviation International in Venice, Florida, about 70 percent of the students were foreigners" (Irvine).

The above report further stipulates that "Osama bin Laden apparently knew better than the FBI how lax our government was in terms of investigating students who come here for flight training. He took full advantage of it"; the Venice, Florida, school was a place where "Mohammed Atta, who steered American Airlines flight 11 into the north WTC tower, and Marwan Yousef Alshehhi, who flew United Airlines flight 175 into the south tower, were trained. Both had backgrounds that would have sounded an alarm had the CIA checked them" (Irvine). Finally, the hijackers paid with their lives



in the Camusian fashion of an observance of a doctrine of limits for taking innocent lives and possibly some of the hijackers didn't even know it was a suicide mission, not unlike the space monkeys in Palahniuck's novel.

Ultimately, *Fight Club* is truly a prophetic, existentialist novel that names and positions common patterns of existentialism that are listed above and a potent means to interpret a painfully humorous work of art in terms of sex, work, and society. Tyler disappears at the end of the novel, but he is malignantly lurking on the margins of society as the space monkeys look forward to his return. Ultimately, the Camus/Sartre quarrel continues in *Fight Club*. Marla tells the narrator to "wait" before he pulls the trigger to kill himself. Wait becomes the watchword for Palahniuck, the reformatory moralist: one must wait, not commit suicide, and see what may happen next in this absurd world. This includes an authentic relationship with another person whether or not destruction is immanent in our lives. Marla likes the narrator, and she now knows the difference between him and Tyler. The narrator muses, "And nothing. Nothing explodes. The barrel of the gun tucked in my surviving cheek, I say Tyler, you mixed the nitro with paraffin, didn't you. Paraffin never works" (205). Palahniuck's nothingness suggests our ability to recreate our lives anew in the midst of the past, present, work, leisure, chaos, materialism, uncertainty, friendship, and romance. "We are not special. We are not crap or trash, either. We just are" (207). Camus and Sartre would most likely agree on this point.

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