

The Great Escape

Fight Club is not about a bunch of meatheads beating each other up, burning scars of kisses into the back of their hands, or pissing in soup, but rather about the underground fight against the emasculation, alienation, and sense of powerlessness of males in today's modern society. In *Fight Club*, the narrator, who remains nameless throughout the book to emphasize the universal applicability of the story, is completely unaware that his best friend Tyler Durden is his own dissociative identity. The narrator created Tyler Durden to resolve the conflict caused by the disparity between the narrator's present life and his vision of a more perfect existence.

The narrator is a conflicted, troubled, idealistic dreamer, because although all of his body parts want to express his inner emotions, his gestalt has been so effeminized and suppressed by the confining rules required by modernity that his range of conscious behavior is severely limited. This inner conflict causes him to find an escape from his own self-awareness and fabricate a free-spirited alter ego – Tyler Durden. The narrator is reminiscent of “H.C.E.” (here comes everybody – that is to say, all of us) in James Joyce's classic novel “*Finnegan's Wake*.” In *Fight Club*, Palahniuk's narrator (H.C.E.) represents men everywhere who are caught between modern society's expectations of them and their underlying desires to express their raw maleness.

In contrast to the great expectations that H.C.E. has for himself, he is working in an unrewarding, monotonous job that has no redeeming purpose or outlet for his emotions. He works for an automobile company, one of the greatest symbols of modernity in our society. In his job H.C.E. is expected to determine whether it makes

economic sense for his company to fight claims in court or issue a recall of the defective product. His job requires him to coldly analyze the data day after day while remaining detached from the grim reality that people have died as a result of defects in his employer's product. It would be unacceptable for him to cry and demonstrate his sadness – even though he is dealing with grave matters and people have often died as a result of his employer's actions. This disparity between the interests of his employer and what H.C.E feels is in the best interests of society causes him great anguish that manifests itself in his insomnia.

In an attempt to alleviate his depressive insomnia, H.C.E. attends a variety of support groups, and in this environment of despair and misery he finds happiness because it is acceptable to cry there, and he achieves freedom to express himself through those tears in the arms of Robert “Bitch Tits” Paulson. After each support group meets, he feels alive and free because of this newly discovered ability to completely share his emotions – even if it is only for a short time.

Then Marla shows up. Marla represents a woman that H.C.E. is unconsciously attracted to, but is incapable of consciously expressing his attraction to her. His self concept is lacking the social skills required to deal with Marla and he feels threatened by and resents her presence at the support group meetings. He is only capable of interacting with her as a man after he creates his imaginary friend - Tyler Durden. H.C.E. has created an imaginary prison within his mind that severely restricts his freedom to achieve conscious self-actualization, and because he has accepted it as inevitable he is incapable of escaping – even though all he needs to do is open the door.

H.C.E. has become so effeminized and enslaved by his nesting instinct that he decorates his condo with the most fashionable items he can find in IKEA catalogs, from

galvanized steel wall clocks to yin-yang coffee tables and designer dish sets. These items represent the self-concept that modernity has enticed him to accept. These pieces of furniture define who he is. When he gets back from a flight to D.C., which represents the source of society's authority, his condo – which represents his effeminate, IKEA-based reality – has been completely blown apart by an explosion, and along with it a large chunk of the feminine aspect of his identity. When his condo explodes, his “entire life” is blown out its floor-to-ceiling windows. The only remaining item in his condo is his refrigerator, which contains only condiments and no real food, representing the fact that his life is lacking real meaning or substance. As H.C.E. says, “your [entire] life comes down to nothing, and not even nothing, oblivion.” (Fight Club, 17)

Our society has strict rules regarding proper behavior, and has little tolerance for overt physical aggression. Our public schools implement zero-tolerance policies toward violence – students are often not allowed to bring even pictures of guns to school. Expression of violence is limited to carefully regulated sports such as football, where large, manly men prance around the field in tight-fitting pants chasing whoever has the ball for the enjoyment of the crowd.

In traditional Japanese kumite, however, two contestants fight until one of them is either incapacitated or gives up. Fight Club strongly resembles this kumite, and it represents an unsanctioned, underground outlet for expressing unrepressed, raw, masculine aggression. H.C.E.'s creation of fight club represents man's attempt to create an outlet for the expression of raw, aggressive masculinity that is repressed in modern society.

The feminization of society has unbalanced the Yin and Yang aspect of the world. As Yin, the feminine aspects of the world, grows in size and power, Yang, the masculine

aspects, becomes weaker. When the scales become unbalanced, the pendulum tends to swing in the opposite direction to attain equilibrium – Fight Club and Project Mayhem represent attempts to restore this equilibrium. Unfortunately H.C.E.’s imaginary prison prevents him from consciously escaping from the confining rules of society. Rather than choosing or creating non-destructive alternatives to achieve his personal self-actualization in modern society, he feels compelled to sabotage the existing social order and destroy civilization to break free from the strict rules that he feels forced to obey.

Tyler Durden represents the repressed potentiality within H.C.E who exudes masculinity, can interact with females, create an idyllic societal order with new rules, and envision an imaginary utopian society, where “everyone [will refuse] to work until we redistribute the wealth of the world,” and people will “[hunt] elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of the Rockefeller Center.”

H.C.E.’s disruptive and destructive behavior results in the death of the person responsible for his initial liberation by encouraging him to cry, Robert “Bitch Tits” Paulson, analogous to the deaths caused by his employer (symbolizing modernity). Because of H.C.E.’s intense feelings of guilt he feels compelled to disband the revolutionary movement that he has created, but he finds that his followers will not allow this to happen. Unfortunately H.C.E. does not have the inner strength to deal with the unintended consequences of his actions, and his reality begins to disintegrate.

H.C.E. is no longer the honorable leader of the movement, and has lost his authority over the “space monkeys” – his realization that the movement no longer requires his input causes him to crack. H.C.E. then murders his boss in his increasingly violent revolt against authority, and afterwards his killing of the mayor’s special envoy on recycling who symbolizes our feeble attempt to save the planet from the evils of

modernity. As freaky as Marla is, this really freaks her out, and she calls the cops just when H.C.E. reaches the level where he can say that he likes her – not love, but like. He has finally progressed to the point where he can begin to communicate his true feelings. It is too late, however, because everything has fallen apart for H.C.E.

At the end of his journey towards enlightenment, H.C.E. shoots himself in the face – simultaneously mutilating himself in a supremely macho-manly-man way, destroying his illusion of Tyler Durden, and liberating himself completely from the limitations and suffering that he experienced prior to his enlightenment. And although H.C.E. is now physically imprisoned in a mental institution, he is consciously free at last, and he accepts the fact that we are not special, nor are we crap or trash – we just are, and what happens just happens. Blah, blah, blah, the end.

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