

**“Fight Club has been heralded as a Marxist manifesto, an experiment in post-modernism and a surrealist nightmare.” How far do you agree that Fight Club defies genres?**

“The notion of “experimental writing” is difficult to define with any kind of precision”<sup>1</sup>. The most accepted definition is a text that approaches a subject in a radical way. Fight Club could be described to be radical, as it takes Marxism’s central ideas, postmodern tropes and surrealist literary devices in order to create a new radical approach to the role of the individual.

Fight Club could be regarded as Marxist as it criticises consumer culture. Marxist theory sees the way we see the world as “wholly or largely conditioned by the way the economy is organised.”<sup>2</sup> The economic structure of society dictates how people view objects and our own individual commodities. In Fight Club, this point of view is critiqued through the narrator's monologues about his furniture, for example, “the things you used to own, now they own you.”<sup>3</sup> The quote shows how consumerism and capitalism are so powerful that it has overpowered most people, forcing them into this dynamic where they are guided by their goods. However, whilst the book does make many criticisms of capitalism, the characters and the story are not about revolution for the sake of workers but rather to destroy society as a whole and become anarchic. The narrator whilst explaining the aim of Project Mayhem says, “Project Mayhem will break up civilization so we can, make something better out of the world,”<sup>4</sup> which shows how the narrative is not focused on levelling society but destroying it altogether. This is more anarchic than Marxist. Therefore, this shows how Fight Club isn’t truly Marxist as whilst it criticises consumer culture, it focuses more on individual rebellion rather than rebelling for one common cause.

The text also has a Marxist subtext as Project Mayhem are trying to give power to the people. The narrator describes Project Mayhem’s goal as “to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the phrase “had the power to,” shows how they are trying to lift oppressed or less powerful people in order to take control. This implies that the power to control history has always been held by the most powerful, for their own gain. Therefore, the overall goal of Project Mayhem is to take the power back, showing how Fight Club is Marxist as they want to take power away from the highest in society – mainly the rich. However, Fight Club illustrates a nightmarish style of Marxism, as the aim is to take control of history for themselves. Deposing of the powerful elite and becoming their own version of it. This shows the hypocrisy of Project Mayhem - and a more Leninist style of leadership. Marxist literature often empowers a group for a common cause, such as classism, rather than empowering individuals, which Project Mayhem are aiming for as it says, “each man,” rather than a group. However, as said before, they aren’t looking to empower all individuals as they themselves want to control history. Overall, Fight Club presents this Marxist nightmare where the elite are replaced by another group, rather than

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<sup>1</sup>Motte, W., 2018. Experimental Writing, Experimental Reading. *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, [online] 42(2). Available at: <<http://newprairiepress.org>> [Accessed 24 September 2021]

<sup>2</sup> Page 21, AQA A-Level English Literature B: critical anthology, AQA

<sup>3</sup> Page 44, Palahniuk, C (1996) *Fight Club*, Great Britain: Vintage.

<sup>4</sup> Page 125, Palahniuk, C (1996) *Fight Club*, Great Britain: Vintage.

<sup>5</sup> Page 122, Palahniuk, C (1996) *Fight Club*, Great Britain: Vintage.

there being change to society, which is similar to the events of the Russian Revolution of 1917. The genre presented here is like a subversion of a Marxist text and is more in line with literary works such as 1984.

Fight Club features an unreliable narrator, which causes fragmentation in the narrative, which is key part of postmodern literature. An unreliable narrator is “a device which emphasizes the narrator’s subjectivity.” This is shown through the narrator’s fragmented narration as he seems to randomly change subjects. For example, he goes from explaining how to make bombs (“Mix the nitro with sawdust, and you have a nice plastic explosive,”<sup>6</sup>), to then talking about the present situation, (“So Tyler and I are on top of the Parker-Morris Building with the gun stuck in my mouth,”<sup>7</sup>). Whilst these are related in some ways, the disjointed narration pulls the reader in and out of the story. Furthermore, the calm and collected way he describes the events distances the reader from him as this is not the normal reaction to being held at gunpoint. Therefore, the narrator is unreliable as the focus of the narration repeatedly shifts and fragments. However, we later learn that the narrator is retelling the events to God. In the final chapter, God “asks me what I remember.” and the narrator replies “I remember everything.” This shows how the events are him recounting the events of the novel, which could explain the nonchalant way in which he narrates them, as they have already happened. Therefore, this illustrates how he might not be an unreliable narrator. However, God is never confirmed to be God himself and could be another delusion, illustrating how he may still be an unreliable narrator as the reader doesn’t know if the story is true or not. Furthermore, recounting the story means that he is aware of he is telling a story, therefore, Fight Club could be argued to be a meta-narrative, which again makes him unreliable as the narrator can control and alter the story. Therefore, Fight Club is postmodern as it features tropes which are associated with postmodern literature. However, postmodernism – as a genre – is undefinable as other postmodern works tend to be experimental, therefore, whilst Fight Club is recognisable as a postmodern text, this doesn’t inherently act as its genre.

Surrealism in literature is when “the author attempts to display irrational or dreamlike qualities.”<sup>8</sup>, Palahniuk uses these features to create a dreamy atmosphere. Surrealism has come from modernism and postmodernism, therefore an extension of the postmodern genre, however, it still exists as it’s genre. For example, “I know this because Tyler knows this”<sup>9</sup>. This quote shows how the lines between reality and a dream-like state are blurred as it implies some sort of telepathic power, although later we find out that is due to them been the same person, however, for a first-time reader the effect makes you question the rationality of the book. The line is repeated throughout the book, without pattern, and acts as a reminder of the blurred lines. The unreliable narrator also adds to this effect, as not only is the narration ambiguous, it is also unreliable. Furthermore, the only explanation of this twist is “Tyler and I share the same body, and until now, I didn’t know it,”<sup>10</sup> and that when Tyler is awake the narrator is asleep. Again, this creates a dream-like quality as it is

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<sup>6</sup> Page 12 Palahniuk, C (1996) Fight Club, Great Britain: Vintage.

<sup>7</sup> Page 12, Palahniuk, C (1996) Fight Club, Great Britain: Vintage.

<sup>8</sup>Writing Explained (2021) *What is Surrealism in Literature? Definition, Examples of Surrealism in Literature*, Available at: <https://writingexplained.org/grammar-dictionary/surrealism> (Accessed: 24th June 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Page 12, Palahniuk, C (1996) Fight Club, Great Britain: Vintage.

<sup>10</sup> Page 174, Palahniuk, C (1996) Fight Club, Great Britain: Vintage.

left ambiguous and once again blurs the line between reality and the fantastical. This could be described as surreal as it illustrates the dream-like qualities present throughout the novel. However, the surrealism present in the novel is juxtaposed with moments of heavy realism, this is to make the reader question the narrator. Again, as surrealism is an extension of postmodernism, the blend of the two elements, shows how the novel is experimental as it blends the two together to create a juxtaposed nightmare. The reader may not fully understand the surreal elements and the events of the story are called into question due to the unreliable narrator, therefore, it could be argued to be a nightmare for the reader. The surrealistic elements of *Fight Club* are integral to the atmosphere and parts of the narrative; however, they could be described as a feature of the novel, therefore demonstrating how genre defying the text is, as it's innately experimental.

Similarly, *Fight Club* could be argued to be a nightmare, as the text often features disturbing violence for violence's sake. For example, the narrator fights a young man in which he "held the face of mister angel like a baby or a football in the crook of my arm and bashed him with my knuckles, bashed him until his teeth broke through his lips"<sup>11</sup>. This shows the high level of brutality and even the narrator comments on it, saying he wishes to "to destroy something beautiful."<sup>12</sup> This could be a comment on the general destructive nature of humanity, but it could also be a comment on how many destroy things for the sake of violence. It creates an ominous atmosphere as the violence is present to disturb the reader. Later in the text, after Patrick Madden is killed as he threatens to expose Project Mayhem, his wife "giggled and tried to pour champagne between her dead husband's lips."<sup>13</sup> This again, shows how the 'necessary' violence, as in Tyler's eyes he is a threat, becomes disturbing. The nightmare, created through such disturbing images and violence, creates a sense of unease in the reader, as whilst Project Mayhem at first seems to have good goals the violence becomes oversaturated and the centre of the novel. The nightmare created shows the experimental side of the novel as it centres around violence and disturbing images, and side-lines the narrative.

*Fight Club* could be regarded as an experimental piece in which comical elements are blended with existential comments. When meeting Bob for the first time, the narrator exaggerates Bob for comic effect, for example "The big wet face settles down on top of my head, and I am lost inside"<sup>14</sup>, but then he comments "when you see how everything you can ever accomplish will end up as trash"<sup>15</sup>. The exaggeration of Bob is used to describe this comically large man who is quite soft but that is contrasted with the existential comment. This contrast makes the reader question the narrator's thoughts. Are these comments supposed to be taken as a joke? If so, then we once again begin to question our narrator who thinks this is funny and if not, then the change in tone could make the reader feel the sadness of the comment more deeply. Furthermore, Bob is introduced as a comedic character as the narrator is pushed between of "Bob's new sweating tits"<sup>16</sup>. This has a comedic affect as it's in some ways grotesque but also exaggerated and subverts expectations. This is later contrasted for example "Robert Paulson will be forty-eight years

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<sup>11</sup> Page 124, Palahniuk, C (1996) *Fight Club*, Great Britain: Vintage.

<sup>12</sup> Page 122, Palahniuk, C (1996) *Fight Club*, Great Britain: Vintage.

<sup>13</sup> Page 199, Palahniuk, C (1996) *Fight Club*, Great Britain: Vintage.

<sup>14</sup> Page 17, Palahniuk, C (1996) *Fight Club*, Great Britain: Vintage.

<sup>15</sup> Page 17, Palahniuk, C (1996) *Fight Club*, Great Britain: Vintage.

<sup>16</sup> Page 16, Palahniuk, C (1996) *Fight Club*, Great Britain: Vintage.

old, forever.”<sup>17</sup> Again, the contrast of this character’s introduction and death makes the existentialist comment even more impactful to the reader. This juxtaposition is further enhanced by the death scene also having bits of comedy as well as the existential message. For example, when the narrator describes the events of Bob's death as, “The big moosie was on a regulation chill-and-drill homework assignment.”<sup>18</sup> The use of ‘the big moosie’ once again exaggerates his size and whilst also making him seem more animalistic which usually would be for comedic affect. Whilst it could be seen as sentimental, it appears disjointed as he seems to be laughing at him whilst also explaining his death. This could be argued to be experimental – and therefore genre-defying – as the reader may be pulled out of the narrative, due to the disconnection created by the contrast.

Fight Club ultimately could be argued to be genre-defying, almost as apolitical, as people from across the political spectrum have chosen their own message. The incel movement has heralded it as the way to move forward in the world, whilst leftist have seen it as a comment on the consumerist culture. The subjectivity of the novel is it’s defining feature as this not only allows many readings but also gives power to the individual as it gives each reader the freedom to create their interpretation.

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<sup>17</sup> Page 176, Palahniuk, C (1996) *Fight Club*, Great Britain: Vintage.

<sup>18</sup> Page 176, Palahniuk, C (1996) *Fight Club*, Great Britain: Vintage.

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