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English 3 Honors

McFadden, Period 3

**If You're Going to Read This, Don't Bother**

"I want to have your abortion" (Fight Club). It is this kind of shocking statement that Chuck Palahniuk (pronounced paul-ah-nik) uses to engage his readers. Known "to blurt out the things that we'd rather not hear about when we don't want to hear about them" (Agony), Palahniuk is distinguished by this awful essence of disgust that keeps readers turning the pages. It is this captivating writing style that has critics lauding his words. But there is more to Palahniuk's writing than just shock appeal, and there is more to Palahniuk than just writing.

Chuck Palahniuk was born on February 21, 1961 in Portland, Oregon. He grew up on a farm living with his grandparents, as his parents were frequently separated. Palahniuk began to write in his thirties and first wrote a book titled Invisible Monsters, which was rejected by publishers due, not surprisingly, to its content. In response to the rejection, Palahniuk wrote Fight Club.

Intended "to offend, to shock and to punish all the people who wouldn't publish my 'good' work" (CPnet), Palahniuk was surprised when the novel became his first published work.

Palahniuk's works are notorious for their descriptive and often graphic violence. To understand the motivation behind this violence, examining the Palahniuk's family history reveals a great deal. Chuck Palahniuk grandfather, Nick Palahniuk, murdered his wife and then went after Chuck's father (as a child) Fred. Nick Palahniuk, unable to find Fred, turned the gun on himself. More recently the violent trend continued in the Palahniuk family when Chuck Palahniuk's father was violently murdered and then had his body dragged into a cabin and burned to the ground. The younger Palahniuk has confirmed how he used writing as a release: "The only way I coped, was by writing" (CPnet). Clearly the violent history of Palahniuk's life contributed to the violent writing of his debut novel (CPnet).

Today, Palahniuk lives outside Portland, Oregon on a ranch where he tends to his animals and provides his friends with a frat-like place to sleep. Although one might expect a quiet farm to be the perfect place to write, Palahniuk claims he hardly ever writes alone, but much more prefers public places like parks and cafes. Palahniuk is currently working on his seventh novel (CPnet).

Chuck Palahniuk published his first novel in 1996, and several since. More than just a popular author, he is a cult (CPnet). In fact, the official source for information regarding Chuck Palahniuk on the internet is even called "The Cult." The opinions of average Sunday-afternoon readers are one thing. But the words of literary critics carry much more weight. Take for example Fanny French of the Portland City Search, who writes in Palahniuk's home city:

The strength of Palahniuk's novel comes from the astonishing power of his imagination, not to mention his sense of humor. At many points in the course of its scant 200 pages, Fight Club reads like an imaginative and witty diatribe on consumerism, greed, self-importance, beauty, the working world and, of course, the pathology of support groups. At the same time, it is an incredibly violent work of literature, filled with graphic scenes of jaw cracking and head bashing. While the violence is sometimes, thankfully, incomplete, it's no less worrisome to the reader.

French points out the important role that humor plays in Palahniuk's work, but more than a humorous piece of literature, Fight Club is a social commentary on consumerism, greed, self-importance, etc. French goes on to compare Palahniuk's Fight Club to F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby:

Though the setting for this end-of-millennium tale is vastly darker and more disturbing than Fitzgerald's West Egg, the narrator of Fight Club is a lethal Nick Carraway infatuated with a modern-day Jay Gatsby.

The parallels between the stories indeed lay below the surface, but that is beside the point. The point is that this author is being compared to perhaps one of America's greatest authors. But this was not an accident. Palahniuk admitted in an interview that he "reread The Great Gatsby at least once a year" (Bruise Control). Fitzgerald's Gatsby is studied around the world as an insight into America. Conceivably, in the not-to-distant future, high school students will look to Palahniuk for an awareness of American life at the millennium's end.

Rick Kleffel of The Agony Column Book Reviews and Commentary finds the depth in Palahniuk's writing:

Between the all-pro facility for writing great language, the uncaring-all-seeing-eye and the lightly concealed core of genuine emotion, Choke manages to do a lot more than the average satire. It's not really satire, by the end of the novel. Palahniuk invests enough emotion and care and reality in his characters that he moves well beyond the facile surface of the excellent language he wields. Choke is nothing less than an excellent novel full of thought-provoking ideas. If it wasn't for the fact that all the ideas are utterly entrenched in reality, Choke might seem to be a piece of science fiction, since it sends the mind reeling in the same way as the best [science fiction]. But for the clarity of its vision, it's much closer to science fact.

Kleffel observes that because Palahniuk is able to invest in his characters, he has the ability to multiply the satirical effect his ideas would otherwise have. By making

his novels believable, he is able to force the reader to think. By making his novels humorous, he is able to keep the reader engaged. And by keeping his audience engaged he is able successfully to convey a message which would otherwise be, by another means, effectively lost.

One such message Palahniuk warns about is the growth of consumerism in America and how it has sublimated itself into our culture. Consumerism is the myth that the individual will be gratified and integrated by consuming (Consumerism and). Consumerism today has several different facets. There is the excessive waste of resources, and there is the purchasing of goods you just do not need. In Fight Club, the narrator experiences the negative effect that consumerism can have:

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

Palahniuk himself has admitted to leading a similar life. He has since moved into a small farm house where he doesn't even ever watch television. The effect that consumerism has had on Palahniuk is difficult to judge. However, from his novels, one can infer that he was once also a typical American shopper. He has since changed and hopes to show others the dangers of becoming dependant on the perfect "sofa." In reality however, your "sofa" does not have to be a tangible object. It is though anything which someone will let control their life. Palahniuk has a knack for transposing his personal philosophies into creative stories.

Chuck Palahniuk is undeniably a talented writer. His ability to write multifaceted novels that contain humor and satire, while at the same time developing characters that are believable and honest, truly set Palahniuk apart as a great writer. I have found all of his work both exciting and disgusting, but mostly funny. When reading a Palahniuk novel, I often find myself confused about how I should react. Take for example a scene in Fight Club where one of the main characters, who works at a movie theater, splices inappropriate images into family films:

This is one of those pet adventures, where the dog and the cat are left behind by a traveling family and must find their way home. In reel three, just after the dog and cat, who have human voices and talk to each other, have eaten out of a garbage can, there's the flash of an erection. Tyler does this... Divide a second into sixty equal parts. That's how long the erection is. Towering four stories tall over the popcorn auditorium, slipper red and terrible (30).

I am not sure if I should laugh or be disgusted. One critic compared his writing to a "Dead Baby joke" (Powells.com). His ability to allow many emotions to occur entwined amongst each other produces great reactions and great literature.

My main complaint however, besides being unsure in my response to some of his writing, is the often pessimistic and nihilistic theme that is common in many of his novels. Nihilism is an attitude rejecting all ethical or philosophical principles. The idea behind nihilism is that the point of life is that "there is *no* point" (Nihilism). I personally find this viewpoint sad. If there is no point



then why do I need to be here? Therefore I disagree with Palahniuk's idea.

I find Chuck Palahniuk's writings thought provoking, however most ideas presented in his novels are hardly original. Palahniuk even said in a recent interview, "I don't write so much as just organize and deliver information" (Bruise Control). In any case, Palahniuk is a great "deliverer of information." I personally recommend Palahniuk to anyone who can handle the violence, the laughter, the shock, and the depth. But then again, it was Chuck Palahniuk who wrote the first line of Choke to be "If you're going to read this, don't bother."

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