

## **Extended Essay**

English B- Category 3

### **Analysis of Fight Club**

#### **Research Question**

Analysis on Fight Club:

Is Chuck Palahniuk's "Fight Club" an American Dream alternative in terms of a dystopian aspect?

**Word Count: 3651**

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## I. Introduction

“You are not special. You're not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You're the same decaying organic matter as everything else. We're all part of the same compost heap. We're all singing, all dancing crap of the world.”

— Chuck Palahniuk, Fight Club

As the right opposite of the conceptual idea of “American Dream”. The term “American Dream” was used for the first time in the book “The Epic of America<sup>1</sup>” by James Truslow Adams in 1931.<sup>2</sup>

Based on the term and the use of it, I will be aiming for proving the book Fight Club as an actual dystopia itself and how it should be criticized based on my justifications.

This Extended Essay will be synthesizing understanding of dystopia and reflecting the misconceptions on the book Fight Club relating to the glorious “American Dream” emphasizing how it went corrupt from being sensible . The sardonic approaches of Chuck Palahniuk as “<sup>3</sup> Contrary to statements about promise of equal opportunity for upward social mobility- including health status, education, and homeownership . The afflux of the story simplifies how the reversed idea of anyone from any social background could potentially become wealthy with very little on the hand.

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<sup>1</sup> Columbia University. "James Truslow Adams papers, 1918 - 1949.[http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/archival/collections/ldpd\\_4078384/](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/archival/collections/ldpd_4078384/)

<sup>2</sup> “That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.”

<sup>3</sup> Page 44 Fight Club

## II. What's a Dystopia?

As the Meriam-Webster states the word dystopia is “an imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanised, fearful lives<sup>4</sup>”. A **dystopia** (from Ancient Greek δυσ- "bad, hard" and τόπος "place"; alternatively **cacotopia** )<sup>5</sup>

### a. What makes a literary work a “dystopia”?

As stated<sup>6</sup>, it has to go through 3 different synthesis phases. First, being whether it fits into the characteristics of a utopia and second being the determinant factor control and third being the protagonist itself .

#### a. Characteristics of an dystopia.

- i. Propaganda as a control mechanism .
- ii. Restriction of information, independent thought, and freedom
- iii. A worshipped figurehead or concept
- iv. Constant surveillance.
- v. Fear of the outside world
- vi. A dehumanized state
- vii. The natural world banished and distrusted
- viii. Conformity
- ix. An illusion of a perfect utopian world

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dystopia>

<sup>5</sup> Cacotopia (from κακός *kakos* "bad") was the term used by [Jeremy Bentham](#) in his 1818 Plan of Parliamentary Reform ("Dystopia". Archived from [the original](#) on 26 March 2006. Retrieved 19 March 2006

<sup>6</sup> [ReadWriteThink.org](#)

ab. Types of Dystopian Controls

- i. Corporate control
- ii. Bureaucratic control
- iii. Technological control
- iv. Philosophical/religious control

abc. The Dystopian Protagonist

- i. feels trapped and is struggles to escape.
- ii. questions the existing social and political systems.
- iii. believes or feels that something is terribly wrong with the society in which he or she lives.
- iv. helps the audience recognizes the negative aspects of the dystopian world through his or her perspective.

### III. Determination of Dystopia in Fight Club

#### a. Characteristics of a dystopia.

##### i. Propaganda as a control mechanism .

Project Mayhem is a Nazi-typed organization “with unreflexive skinheads who just repeat Tyler’s orders”<sup>7</sup> (Diken and Laustsen 2002: 356). Where it is being used to spread Tyler’s anti-consumerist scheme. The goal is to create chaos in order to demolish financial institutions. As it is simplified to <sup>8</sup>” In order to create something with mass power you’ll have to have partisans for your propaganda sect.

With this in mind a propaganda properly means “...is the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols.”<sup>9</sup> (Lasswell, 1927 p. 627) which we can state that collective attitude could be corrected by Project Mayhem and significant symbols being Tyler and narrator.

##### ii. Restriction of information, independent thought, and freedom

To begin with “The first rule about fight club is you don’t talk about fight club.” is the exact chief totalitarian thought of the restricted idea. You are not allowed to share what you believe

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/resources/sociology-online-papers/papers/diken-laustsen-enjoy-your-fight.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Excerpt From: Chuck Palahniuk. “Fight Club.” Page 173

<sup>9</sup> Lasswell, H. D. (1927). The theory of political propaganda. *The American Political Science Review*, 21, 3, 627-631.

in life. Dissuasions about the “confidante” factor which means someone who can keep deep secrets. Which happens to be very socially determinant and draining. “<sup>10</sup>” For instance besides Marla, Tyler or the narrator factor, the side main characters such as Bob from Testicle Cancer Group is the right sample for “no one to talk to” category which leads to our main problem being well restricted.

### iii. A worshipped figurehead or concept

Although it is pretty complicated to give an actual indication about the end of the book, based on my point of view Tyler or narrator could be our indicator for an attachment figure. Attachment theory states that idol attachment can be defined as “the intensity of an individual’s target-specific emotional bond with a human brand” (Bowlby, 1982; Thomson et al., 2005). <sup>11</sup> By this we can state that our intensity is Tyler or the narrator here, his human brand is the Project Mayhem and the bond itself which the author himself says “Project Mayhem was based on the Portland Cacophony Society, which I used to do more of. They get together and pull these enormous pranks. They're international now, almost every major city has a cacophony society and they pull huge pranks and jokes and stunts.”<sup>12</sup> So, this happens to prove that in order to the being worshiped by citizens of the society has to have an aim for future in order to be followed.

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<sup>10</sup>Social determinants of GHQ score by postal survey J.Harrison, S.Barrow, L.Gask, F.Creed *Journal of Public Health*, Volume 21, Issue 3, September 1999, Pages 283–288, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/21.3.283> <https://academic.oup.com/jpubhealth/article/21/3/283/1519772?login=true>

<sup>11</sup> Bowlby, J. (1982), *Attachment and Loss: (Volume 1) Attachment*, Basic Books, New York, NY / Thomson, M.D., MacInnis, J. and Park, C.W. (2005), “The ties that bind: measuring the strength of consumers’ emotional attachments to brands”, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 77-91.

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.dvdtalk.com/interviews/chuck\\_palahniuk.html](https://www.dvdtalk.com/interviews/chuck_palahniuk.html)

Tyler Durden/narrator plays the role of Übermensch ("Beyond Man") in the book which is the hypothesis in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Representation of "*An overman as described by Zarathustra, the main character in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, is the one who is willing to risk all for the sake of enhancement of humanity.*"<sup>13</sup> Metaphorically which our Zarathustra to be Tyler Durden/narrator himself when it comes to over-attach to an ideology such as hedonistic fascism. From someone who has a group of people with destructive intentions supported by being pleased by ruination, yes Tyler Durden/ narrator is a liberator figure in the book.

#### iv. Constant surveillance.

Even though there is not a certain indication or evidence behind the book about "citizens whom are perceived to be under surveillance" it is assumable that members of Fight Club are under the surveillance of male dominant environment. It could be detected as attacking male identity and agency by dissolving the bonds of male-dominated society, however; the club itself is less interested in criticizing the broader material-citizens rather than their own community. Citizens are not ventured in this situation because the citizens themselves are mostly not aware of what is even going on. So technically yes, there are people who are under surveillance but that doesn't mean they are conscious about it.

#### v. Fear of the outside world

Since there is no indication of land or certain place in the book Fight Club, we cannot say anything behalf of the citizens but what we have to pay attention to is Palahniuk's attitude on

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<sup>13</sup><https://ccrma.stanford.edu/~pj97/Nietzsche.htm>



place/time concept. Palahniuk's concept was to make sure we (us, readers) could apply the circumstances of being in a dystopia scenario into our daily-lives. This does not disprove the fact that actions took time in the era that the book was written.

iv. A dehumanized state

Where the psychotic crisis and dehumanization plays a giant role in one of our main characters such as Marla Singer or Tyler Durden, it is impossible to ignore and detect excessive amount of dehumanized states. It is observable when it comes to the passiveness of side characters. They happened to be from the lower class or fading "middle-class". All of the people given as characters have this one specific thing in common: they are serving the system and they are stipulated to adapt. They are angry from dehumanization that the system decides for them. So as known from the oppression in order to rebel the system, Tyler creates The Fight Club and runs the Project Mayhem. So, the general ensemble in the book is living in a dehumanized state.

v. The natural world is banished and distrusted.

The narrator himself accepting himself in a one to be a representative of a much bigger community "And I wasn't the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue." Or "We all have the same Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern..." (both pg. 43), and he retells the story of his, hers, or everybody's, depressing subsistence in the consumerist society. This is what makes the natural world or natural atmosphere banished and distrusted. Although we're telling this ambiance was

supposedly "natural", the most artificialness of reality slams to the reader most specifically in this extract. So the narrator simply reflects how his and many more lives are being banished by made-up things in life.

#### vi. Conformity

Tyler mentions about breaking up the civilization in the purpose of making something better out of it.. The Space Monkeys (cult members/people who serve for the purpose of Project Mayhem) also claim themselves as nothing individually in order to serve their purpose. So the project and the aim itself is to restrict individualist mentality.

#### vii. An illusion of a perfect utopian world

A dystopia is the environment that has oppressive and totalitarian control, right opposite of it which happens to be "utopia" where the perfect harmony in nature is created by civilians's life together, relying on high empathy and respect towards each other.

## **ab. Types of Dystopian Controls**

### **i. Corporate control**

The corporate control is, men's urge to fight and show their aggression. The book talks about how men were so subdued and had internalized hate towards life. This urge was functioning as the media in the book.

The first rule of Fight Club is to "You do not talk about Fight Club" but in reality the Club gets even exponential increase of members day by day. It even helps the members create a community just like "Project Mayhem".

### **ii. Bureaucratic control**

In the book, Tyler Durden is the bureaucracy himself. He rules people, demands and makes people obey. We can surely assume that with Tyler's egoistic behaviors he was just like a dictator, dictators do not rule by repression alone but seek support as well (Wintrobe, Ronald).<sup>14</sup> Bureaucracy was not mindless at all though it had a common sense at the beginning. His control shows itself when Space Monkeys helped him to create mechanisms to bomb buildings or creating and making rules of a man-centered passive aggressive sect like community.

### **iii. Technological control**

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<sup>14</sup> Wintrobe, Ronald. (2009). Dictatorship: Analytical Approaches. The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics. 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566020.003.0016.

Use of technology was not in favor of human beings. People and characters used the power of technology and destruction mentality similar to the extent of the 90's. The atmosphere is not something that people are not used to, although place and time is not given directly the book mentions guns and technology in a constantly evolving way but that does not mean the tech era in the book is as high-power or developed as nowadays.

#### iv. Philosophical/religious control

The mindset of Fight Club is against the system of static quo lives and defies with the already existing system for the cause of relief and simple, calm life. Thus, the head of the group Tyler/narrator, makes the group obey by oppression. The ideology behind "after the storm calmness", is the reason why men take action by aggression. It is not enforced at all, but it is to abolish the society if you are not a part of "Fight Club" or "Project Mayhem".

### **abc. The Dystopian Protagonist**

#### i. Often feels trapped and is struggling to escape.

The most oppressed one the narrator himself. He goes through an existential crisis in the middle of panicking and meanwhile feeling in peace with the atmosphere. He can not escape the fact that he (narrator) wants Tyler, Tyler wants Marla and Marla wants him (narrator). He feels trapped into a triangle, he feels comfortable at first to his atmosphere but

after getting too comfortable he feels trapped into his reality again and again. So the narrator lived the oppression most. By being strangled that Tyler held.

ii. questions the existing social and political systems.

&

iii. Believes or feels that something is terribly wrong with the society in which he or she lives.

Simply, the meaning behind life is being questioned. How people should not obey their given system and question their reality seems good from given circumstances, but with aggression in the implementation it makes the characters go through an existential crisis. It implicates how individuals obey in every systematic control in their lives just like the existing situation of "elite" community and how they create mess in the other groups of classes in society. The narrator tries to understand his comfort zones by exploring people's pain, but with the help of Tyler he comes to the resolution that he can not feel as comfortable enough if it is not about destructiveness.

iv. Helps the audience recognizes the negative aspects of the dystopian world through his or her perspective.

In the first period focuses on meeting with Tyler but in further periods the reader comes to the realization of Space Monkeys who were "the audience". They were the men bruised by the society they all had the same aim Fight Club and for even small group "Project Mayhem". They of course realized the interrupted system in their world. And narrator/Tyler tried to change it but ended up with being narrator being a self-antagonist to himself. The realization eventually ends with destruction that they've created with the same aim but different income.

## IV. American Dream

*“That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.”*

*-James Truslow Adams*

### e. **What is American Dream?**

Over the years in United States, the glory of a better life is mostly associated with economic and material prosperity such as doing what you've always dreamed for, for example; 'your dream car' or 'your dream house' as well as being about financial security.

The purpose of American Dream's existence until this day could be divided into two main aspects a. Prominence on material affluence b. Unfairness on wealth division in the United States.

The problem with materialistic approaches and unfairness in wealth division started back in "mid 1800's, over 90 percent of the people at the top inherited money, and only 2 percent of the people at the bottom were able to rise from the bottom to the top"<sup>15</sup> (Fortin). While the US nation believed as they can rise as "rags to riches" the scheme wasn't really realistic.

The gap in income distribution in the US remained approximately the same over the next centennial. During the Industrial Revolution, the U.S switched from an agricultural society to a predominantly industrial society. (Higham) Although it did not change the wealth gap drastically, 1% of the population still controlled 20% of the wealth, and the 10% controlled 50% of the wealth (Fortin). However, this did not change the fact that the bottom class remained the same as the higher class did not stop the inside growth. So, eventually the

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<sup>15</sup> Fortin, Roger. "The American Dream" Seminar Course. Smith Hall 250, Cincinnati. 30 Sept. and 14 Oct. 2014.

“American Dream” started to have a weaker base for the lower class to start from the bottom. Based on the research by the PEW charitable trusts, “43% of Americans raised from the bottom of the income ladder, the remaining stuck there as adults, and 70% never even made it to the middle” .

The new America also averts different ethnic groups to assimilate in the American community. Also creates a language barrier from people who immigrated to U.S in the name of creating the “American Dream” ideal.

**f. Why did American Dream has a higher chance to fail?**

**a. Cost of housing, healthcare, and higher education rise is too high.**

After the rise of Neo-liberalist era in United States, compared to its neighbor countries the U.S had cheaper groceries and electronics but that did not stop to enable extractive approaches in health-care, housing, higher-education with high-risks to have debts for middle and lower income families.

Although the book doesn't really directly underlines this issue by saying

“ And the men say, go ahead, piss your fancy American piss rich and yellow with too many vitamins. Rich and expensive and thrown away.”<sup>16</sup>

where makes the reader realize how corrupt the US system is with the health industry. Since Americans have to have private health insurance, people go for cheaper and less efficient

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<sup>16</sup> Excerpt From: Chuck Palahniuk. "Fight Club." Apple Books.



ways like vitamins in order not to pay for simple health check-ups and health issues. And also by saying

“Marla hasn’t had health insurance for a couple years so she’s stopped looking, but this morning she looks and there seemed to be a lump and the nodes under her arm near the lump were hard and tender at the same time and she couldn’t tell anyone she loves because she doesn’t want to scare them and she can’t afford to see a doctor if this is nothing, but she needed to talk to someone and someone else needed to look”<sup>17</sup>

Highlights the given issue above. If you’re in the middle to lower class or in lower class, you’re more likely to be crushed by the system. Just like Marla’s issue with her lump.

#### **b. Comparing productivity with worker compensation, wages are too low.**

From beginning of 1930’s with the stagflation crisis in the 1970’s, unionized laborers have gotten excessive amount of compensation which made the firms obligated to raise the prices which also led workers to demand their wages. By this chain action an inflationary spiral started to play a very noticeable role in money cycle of US.

And eventually this rapid rises and falls in companies lead SME’s (Regulation on the Definition, Qualifications, and Classification of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) which happened to be from lower to middle class people in order to make sure the “American Dream” happen became even lower chance to happen.

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<sup>17</sup>Excerpt From: Chuck Palahniuk. "Fight Club." Apple Books.

Since the book *Fight Club* highly emphasizes and degrades being crushed by the system, we can highly see this when the narrator and Tyler pulls up to a store like 7-Eleven or QuickTrip type of store. And threatens to kill this young man Raymond K. Hessel or Raymond K. K. K. Hessel (not exactly clear enough that this is a reference to the "K. K.K.", a hysterical reference to racist and white supremacist terror organization "Ku Klux Klan") by insulting young man by saying "Raymond Hessel, Raymond didn't say anything. Probably he figured I was after his money, his minimum wage, the fourteen dollars in his wallet. Oh, Raymond Hessel, all twenty-three years of you, when you started crying, tears rolling down the barrel of my gun pressed to your temple, no, this wasn't about money. Not everything is about money."<sup>18</sup> Where the narrator lets young men by making a promise with by saying that he wouldn't kill him if he goes back to college instead of working "Raymond Hessel, and I'd rather kill you than see you working a shit job for just enough money to buy cheese and watch television." Since in US low wage is a cause of unhappiness according to Board Governors of the Federal Reserve System "Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF) provides evidence that payment preferences for some and a lack of cash on-hand for others contributed to this result. By this issue researches accuse that low wage brings unhappiness in the US. When the narrator realizes the issue with the young man he oppresses him in order to turn him from the wrong way which is near.

**c. "White Man" has higher chance to success in American Dream the reason why gender inequality and racism.**

Despite the level of mass-satisfaction from the nation, only about one-in-five which's close to 17% of the US population has chance to success in American Dream. Although the

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<sup>18</sup>Excerpt From: Chuck Palahniuk. "Fight Club." Apple Books.

concept "American Dream" is very variable, since the beginning of United State's history, "becoming wealthy" is an essential. It's well known that in America White population is higher than other ethnic groups, being 41% of the population while others are being black and hispanic mostly. So, in order to achieve "The American Dream" you have to have the chance to afford college education in United States and somewhat be white. If not, individuals have lower chance to success "the Dream".

In the book this issue was realized in the quote; "Imagine, when we call a strike and everyone refuses to work until we redistribute the wealth of the world."<sup>19</sup> although it's not exact point shot to the issue it's very close to being a contrary scenario. Tyler wants the opposite of what they have in their current environment, such as working, laboring, he realizes income inequality at the finest just like where he was working in a fine dining restaurant sabotaging elite or upper class's food. It's his and narrator's way of contumacy, sabotaging.

So we can assume that on the book it is about destroying what is already happening. Therefore, based on our main question, the book Fight Club cheers for civil disobedience.

Also at the beginning the narrator was talking about how he was adjusting to "Middle Class" to "Upper Middle Class" by working for hours and being a college grad did not help with anything at all. The book emphasizes how corrupt the ongoing system is, when argued on theory but failing in reality.

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<sup>19</sup> Excerpt From: Chuck Palahniuk. "Fight Club." Apple Books. Page 157

## V. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can come to the conclusion of yes, the book reflects the dystopia of the American Dream. Since the book is so invested in individuals who can achieve things by themselves and the harmless version of American Dream implicates the idea of "Land of Freedom", they are both against what the upmost idea is at the end.

At the end Fight Club still remains the idea of being a "cacotopia" so throughout this essay it was very hard to prove the opposite scenario. The author himself doesn't really a fan of the concept of "American Dream" itself since the beginning just like from another book of his *Haunted* saying that "That's the American Dream: to make your life into something you can sell." So arguing about someone from this mindset it was clear that Fight Club was going to be a dystopia for the American Dream.

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