

JIHOČESKÁ UNIVERZITA V ČESKÝCH BUDĚJOVICÍCH
FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA
ÚSTAV ANGLISTIKY

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE
ELEMENTS OF TRANSCENDENTALISM IN CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S *FIGHT CLUB*

Vedoucí práce: PhDr. Mariana Machová, Ph.D.

Autor práce: Tereza Filipová

Studijní obor: Anglický jazyk a literatura - Španělský jazyk a literatura

Ročník: 3.

Prohlašuji, že svoji bakalářskou práci jsem vypracoval/a samostatně, pouze s použitím pramenů a literatury uvedených v seznamu citované literatury.

Prohlašuji, že v souladu s § 47b zákona č. 111/1998 Sb. v platném znění souhlasím se zveřejněním své bakalářské práce, a to v nezkrácené podobě elektronickou cestou ve veřejně přístupné části databáze STAG provozované Jihočeskou univerzitou v Českých Budějovicích na jejích internetových stránkách, a to se zachováním autorského práva k odevzdanému textu této kvalifikační práce. Souhlasím dále s tím, aby toutéž elektronickou cestou byly v souladu s uvedeným ustanovením zákona č. 111/1998 Sb. zveřejněny posudky školitele a oponentů práce i záznam o průběhu a výsledky obhajoby kvalifikační práce. Rovněž souhlasím s porovnáním textu mé kvalifikační práce s databází kvalifikačních prací Theses.cz provozovanou Národním registrem vysokoškolských kvalifikačních prací a systémem na odhalování plagiátů.

České Budějovice 9. května 2016

.....

Tereza Filipová

I would like to thank my supervisor PhDr. Mariana Machová, Ph.D. for her support and expertise. My thanks also go to my friends and family who have put up with me during the last couple of months of finishing my thesis.

Anotace

Transcendentalismus, filozofické a literární hnutí 19. století působící ve Spojených státech amerických, znatelně ovlivnilo některé pozdější literární směry. Některé z hlavních principů tohoto hnutí, jako víra v individualitu lidí a nechuť k autoritám a materialismu, jsou zřetelné v románu Klub rváčů Chucka Palahniuka. Cílem této bakalářské práce je prozkoumat ztvárnění těchto společenských fenoménů ve vybraných transcendentálních dílech a v Palahniukově románu a předložit možné historické a společenské změny, které ovlivnily jejich zobrazení.

Annotation

Transcendentalism, a literary and philosophical movement prominent in the 19th century in the United States of America, significantly influenced some of the subsequent literary movements. Some of the main tenets of Transcendentalism, like the belief in the power of an individual and rejection of authorities and materialism, are prominent in Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club*. The aim of this thesis is to investigate the portrayal of these social phenomena in selected Transcendentalist works and in Palahniuk's novel and to propose what could be some of the historical and social changes that influenced their depiction.

Contents

Introduction.....	7
1. Transcendentalism and the society of the mid-19th century	8
2. Palahniuk's representation of contemporary life.....	11
2.1 Disintegration of family and other social ties	13
2.2 Gender.....	14
2.3 Corporations.....	15
3. Fight Club and Transcendentalism - literary analyses.....	17
3.1 Rejection of materialism in <i>Fight Club</i> and Thoreau's <i>Walden</i>	17
3.2 Rejection of authorities in <i>Fight Club</i> and Thoreu's "Civil Disobedience"	25
3.3 Importance of individualism in <i>Fight Club</i> and Emerson's "Self-Reliance"	32
Conslusion.....	39
Works Cited.....	42

Introduction

At first sight, Transcendentalism and the novel *Fight Club* do not seem to have many things in common. Transcendentalism was a mid-19th century literary and philosophical movement with a rather positive outlook on the future of humanity. In contrast, *Fight Club* is a dark 1996 novel by the American author Chuck Palahniuk, which deals with the themes of loneliness, disillusionment with society, and the injustice it perpetrates against its members.

In this essay, I will investigate the similarities and differences between this postmodern novel and selected Transcendentalist works. I will argue that despite being written in two distinct periods, there are many points that connect them. This is probably due to the fact that all of the four works I will analyze are in fact examples of acting out against the status quo in their respective eras, while utilizing similar concepts of resistance. In my analysis, I will concentrate on three types of phenomena – rejection of authorities, belief in the power of an individual, and rejection of materialism. The aim of this thesis will be to find differences in the portrayal of these concepts in the two eras and to establish what the possible reasons for the changes in their depiction are.

It has to be noted that I am in no way proposing that Transcendentalism directly influenced Palahniuk or that Emerson and Thoreau would condone *Fight Club*'s methods of political resistance. However, Transcendentalism is definitely one of the building blocks of modern American identity, the aftermath of which is portrayed in Palahniuk's novel.

First, I will briefly introduce both periods that shaped the creation of works I will be analyzing, concentrating mainly on the historical and social events that took place during the respective eras. In the second part of the thesis, I will compare *Fight Club* with Henry David Thoreau's texts *Walden* and "Civil Disobedience" and Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance". The first analysis will compare *Fight Club*'s and *Walden*'s stance on materialism, while the second one will deal with the opinions regarding authorities proposed by "Civil Disobedience". Lastly, I will compare Palahniuk's and Emerson's take on the issue of individualism. It needs to be noted that the three social phenomena are in some ways present in all three of the Transcendentalist texts, however, in my opinion each of them concentrates on one particular idea in greater detail than the other two.

1. Transcendentalism and the society of the mid-19th century

As is true of most philosophical and artistic movements, they are greatly formed by the society of their time. The social climate often determines the success of a movement or a line of thought. That is also the case with American Transcendentalism, which fit well with the prevailing attitudes of society in the 19th century. This compatibility with current social trends made Transcendentalism one of the most important intellectual movements of the mid-nineteenth century with great implications on subsequent American culture and thinking (Reynolds and Lynch 148).

The United States of the 19th century was a new and ambitious nation, which was rapidly expanding its political, cultural and geographical limits. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 significantly extended its territory to the West; this acquisition of land from France actually doubled the area of the country and made the vast space west of the Mississippi available for setting up new communities. As to the political situation of the country at the beginning of the century, the US was still in the process of determining how to act as a sovereign country. Despite some uncertainty, there was a widespread increase of interest in politics and other activities in the social sphere, mainly thanks to the right to vote that was granted to all free adult male citizens in the 1820s. This meant that now it wasn't just property owners who could decide the country's political future. Economically the US subscribed to the laissez-faire model with a minimum of government interventions (Phillips and Ladd 30-31).

The quick political and economical progress of the country lead to growing optimism among American citizens – the future seemed full of promise and Americans felt as if they had "a special place in history" (Phillips and Ladd 31). This feeling of invincibility then seeped into everything they did. For example, according to Phillips and Ladd the ambitious policies adopted by the president Andrew Jackson, who was in office during the years 1829-1837, reflected the positive feelings and energy in society. Another widespread belief among Americans was the faith in the power of an individual to overcome his or her own circumstances, an example of which was set up by the president Jackson who was a successful self-made man. The individualistic philosophy of Transcendentalism reflected all this optimism and became a great vehicle for expressing the

feeling of contemporary American identity (Phillips and Ladd 30-31).

Emerson talks about a growing tendency of introspection among many Americans in his lecture “Historic Notes on Life and Letters in New England” in which he remarks that “[t]he key to the period appeared [...] to be that the mind had become aware of itself”. According to Emerson, it was especially the younger generation of the time that had a “tendency to introversion, self-dissection, and anatomizing of motives” (“Historic Notes”).

It is Ralph Waldo Emerson, who is most often recognized as being the essential figure of American Transcendentalism. The ideas of this Bostonian were significantly shaped during his stay in Europe, where he was influenced by German Idealism through poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Thomas Carlyle. Among his other influences were the tenets of Eastern religions, works of Plato, Neoplatonism, and the views of British philosophers David Hume, John Locke, and Bishop Berkeley. All these influences deepened Emerson's belief in the strength of an individual and the importance of human intuition (Gray 114). After coming back to the United States, he settled in Concord, Massachusetts, and with a circle of like-minded writers and thinkers established the Hedge Club, also called the Transcendental Club, that occasionally met in his house (Gray 115). The word transcendental came from the philosophy of Kant. Emerson describes the origin of the name in his lecture “The Transcendentalist”:

It is well known to most of my audience, that the Idealism of the present day acquired the name of Transcendental, from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant, of Konigsberg, who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke, which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses, by showing that there was a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them *Transcendental* forms. (93)

The group that got together in the Transcendental Club was very varied and its members disagreed on many things, but, despite their differences, they all thought it

important to advance the state of American philosophy, literature, and other arts (Phillips and Ladd 32). Among the members were the philosopher Amos Bronson Alcott, the poet Jones Very, and writers Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. They were occasionally joined by the journalist Orestes Brownson and the novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne (Phillips and Ladd 32). Emerson was also involved in the publication of the Transcendentalist quarterly magazine *The Dial*, published from 1840, where he later became the editor (Gray 115).

As was mentioned previously, Transcendentalism was far from a unified movement. There were variations with each member but there are certain traits that most Transcendentalist thinkers and authors have in common (Reynolds and Lynch 148). The belief in the power of an individual became a principle that resonated deeply with most of the adherents of the movement, as was also the case with the rest of the American society. Another important part of the Transcendentalist thought was the superiority of an individual to the authority of state institutions and society as a whole. Distrust in traditions and routines of society is also a typical trait of the movement. There was a definite focus on the possibilities of the future rather than dwelling on the past (Gray 117). In the case of spiritual matters, most Transcendentalists saw nature as the ultimate sacred entity. Emerson was very prolific when it came to the topic of nature – he saw it as the emblem of the spirit and took nature and the self to be indelible (Gray 115). Transcendentalists believed in the ability of everyone to get to a purer, higher level of being through nature. They thought that everyone was equal and had the same opportunity to transcend their baser human instincts as everyone else. Transcendentalism was in this way as democratic as the framers of the U.S. Constitution thought the world should be. (Phillips and Ladd 31, 34).

In my thesis I will focus on selected works of two of the main representatives of the movement, Emerson and Thoreau. Each of them had an integral role in the movement and they both propagated the Transcendentalist thought in their particular way. Emerson was the one who laid the intellectual foundation of the movement while Thoreau made sure to put its abstract ideas into practice (Phillips and Ladd 41).

2. Palahniuk's representation of contemporary life

After describing the zeitgeist and political developments that accompanied Transcendentalism, it is necessary to look at the society Chuck Palahniuk's fictional characters inhabit. It is safe to say that the world according to Palahniuk is one of uncertainty and insecurity. Transcendentalism's optimistic view of the future is long gone and instead the reader encounters a reality afflicted by postmodern anxiety. In this section, I will analyze some of the themes that are prominent in *Fight Club*, especially the ones that help depict Palahniuk's view of modern society.

Fight Club is a rather dark 1996 novel that examines the bleak reality of post-Cold War consumer culture. It tells the story of an unnamed man (in this thesis I will call him the Narrator since it's the main character who recounts the events of the novel), a fairly successful white-collar worker who is missing direction in his life and uses material possessions to give meaning to his existence. Even though his life is comfortable and seemingly without problems, in reality he is quite depressed and suffers from insomnia. During his sleepless nights, he actually lives as his alter-ego Tyler, a guerilla fighter of sorts, which he realizes only by the end of the story. *Fight Club* is Palahniuk's first published novel and while he has written other successful works, it still remains his most popular novel yet (Collado-Rodríguez 2).

Generally, Palahniuk's novels could be described as transgressive fiction which "purposefully confronts the forbidden and clamors against social constraints" (Kuhn and Rubin 1). Collado-Rodríguez characterizes Palahniuk's novels as so-called blank fiction, which is a term that describes works written mostly about the indifferent society of the 1980s and 1990s and its obsession with "violence, indulgence, sexual excess, decadence, consumerism, and commerce" (3). This type of fiction is often associated with terms such as "nihilism, late capitalism, or commodification", description that fits *Fight Club*'s world perfectly (Collado-Rodríguez 3). Palahniuk's characters are often extremely grotesque and wildly exaggerated to a degree which seems almost unreal. However, as readers of Palahniuk we have to bear in mind that we can't take everything he writes about at face value. By depicting extreme versions of reality Palahniuk can truly highlight the lack of morality and sanity in contemporary society (Collado-Rodríguez 4). It also needs to be

noted that in *Fight Club* it is especially hard to recognize what is real and what is not, since the Narrator has a split personality and suffers from hallucinations throughout the novel. Moreover, the story is not written in a linear way, it features many episodes and digressions, and the fragmented narrative makes the storyline far from straightforward. This causes the readers to be as confused as the main character after he discovers the truth about Tyler's real identity and is therefore unable to distinguish facts from fiction. According to Mendieta, this type of storytelling also corresponds with the complexity of today's American culture, which has become so fragmented and overwhelming that it is no longer possible to portray it with a linear narrative (395).

With all this in mind, it is not surprising that *Fight Club* has gotten such a strong response, both positive and negative. Some of the critics were shocked by the events depicted in the novel and saw it as overly invested in self-indulgent nihilism. Others accused Palahniuk of depicting brutal violence in the novel just for the shock value. Regardless of this criticism, *Fight Club* quickly became a favorite among readers, especially after the release of its successful film version in 1999 (Collado-Rodríguez 2). Collado-Rodríguez proposes that the popularity of *Fight Club* might lie in Palahniuk's aforementioned ability to perfectly describe the status quo of the last decades, especially the 1990s, and warn readers of the ways in which the contemporary way of life, ruthless capitalism, and mass media shape human beings and turn them into commodities (7). The novel is a manifesto of the disillusioned capitalistic society of the Western world, whose members are according to Palahniuk living "the opposite of the American Dream" (Kuhn and Rubin 1). The Narrator's fragmented mind seems fitting for the fragmented reality of today's society. Vickroy proposes that life in the postmodern world can be regarded as traumatic because of the "severe effects of commodification and dehumanization of contemporary corporate-run life" (75). This is especially true of Palahniuk's works. He describes American society as disenchanted with what was supposed to be "the promised land of the free" (Collado-Rodríguez 10). Instead of infinite freedom, they now have hollow lives filled with futile interests.

Palahniuk claims that writing has the power to offer a way out of this commodified society and that is precisely what the characters of *Fight Club* are doing (Collado-Rodríguez 8). According to Mendieta, all of Palahniuk's stories are exactly about this

uneven battle of individuals against institutions, or as he puts it about “unmaking, uncoupling, and disentangling our selves from our normal self into which we have been socialized” (395). The characters of the novel are just not the typical heroes one would see fighting against a corrupted system. They have to battle circumstances symptomatic of the postmodern world.

2.1 Disintegration of family and other social ties

One of the traits of contemporary society described in the novel is the declining need for close social relationships. Due to technological and societal progress in the Western society, family ties and other social connections have disintegrated and individuals often live in isolation (Collado-Rodríguez 8). According to Vickroy, the Narrator “embodies the depersonalizing effects of a world practically devoid of human caring and meaning” (61). In his collection of non-fiction stories *Stranger Than Fiction: True Stories*, Palahniuk states that all his works are in fact mainly about a “lonely person looking for some way to connect with other people” (“Fact and Fiction” xv).

It is clear that the effort to find authentic relationships pervades *Fight Club's* whole story. The Narrator doesn't really have a meaningful relationship with his family or work colleagues and doesn't mention any close friends other than Tyler. Before meeting his alter-ego, he finds some sort of authentic connection when attending meetings of various cancer support groups. It is after he starts visiting these gatherings that he is able to get rid of his insomnia and lead a more balanced life. When attending these meetings, he is however concealing his true identity and lying about being sick, therefore the relationships he establishes there cannot really be considered genuine. The Narrator's momentary happiness eventually ends when Marla, an eccentric young woman who later becomes his and Tyler's love interest, starts attending the same support meetings and subsequently realizes he fakes all his supposed illnesses. The Narrator then needs to find a new source of meaning and validation in his life and that is the moment when he and Tyler establish the first fight club.

The theme of dysfunctional relationships in *Fight Club* is most prominently manifested by the absence of father figures in the novel, reflecting the postmodern model of partly disintegrated families. Both the Narrator and Tyler are still distressed by their fathers

leaving them and they are desperately looking for a father-like character in their lives. This “simultaneously absent and threatening father” seems to be one of the main factors that negatively influence them (Giles 24). Their obsession with compensating this deficit leads them to seeking symbols of extreme masculinity, which are often rather a parody of what mainstream culture thinks masculinity should be. Setting up fight clubs is basically just a way in which they can play out these masculine scenarios. And it's not just the two protagonists who hopelessly search for male authorities to emulate. When the narrator points out that “what you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women” (Palahniuk 50), he clearly refers to a systemic problem a whole demographic of Americans has to deal with. According to Giles, fight club substitutes a family for these lost men (26).

It is interesting to note that the Narrator never truly mentions his mother. She is only described as a marginal character who is brought up solely to stand in contrast to the absent father. Even though the mother is the one who took care of the Narrator, she isn't regarded as important; she is actually part of the reason the Narrator seems so disconnected to other people. Vickroy proposes that through Tyler and Marla's dysfunctional relationship the Narrator actually gets to play out traumatic scenarios from his own childhood (66). Like the mother, Marla is often put into background and rejected. For example, at one point the Narrator wonders “if another woman is really the answer [he] need[s]” given that he was brought up by a woman and is now eagerly seeking a father figure (Palahniuk 51).

2.2 Gender

The fact that Marla is basically the only female character of the novel leads us to another aspect of contemporary life the novel portrays – the issue of gender equality and the loss of its clear polarity. The women's rights movement has gained strength since the 1960s and throughout the decades managed to achieve a better stance for women. But for many men, the rise of women's social status brought anxiety about losing the perks of their own privilege. Palahniuk portrays the modern society as overly feminized and lacking a real model for men to follow, an issue which is connected to the absence of father figures mentioned before (Collado-Rodríguez 7).

With this fact in mind, it is no coincidence that the novel is told from the male

perspective. As was hinted on in the previous section, establishing an underground fight club is “a means of transcending the emasculation of [the Narrator’s] generation of American males” (Giles 26). Tyler and the club then represent the dark and destructive side of traditionally viewed masculinity. The fear of effeminization of society is also portrayed in the novel's prominent theme of castration. For one, the so-called mechanics of Project Mayhem, a group of guerilla fighters lead by Tyler, take actual castration as the ultimate threat. And as I pointed out before, the Narrator is obsessed with attending various cancer support groups, especially his favorite – the testicular cancer meeting called “Remaining Men Together”. According to Giles, the fact that the group leader, Big Bob, grew breasts after undergoing hormone therapy embodies the Narrator's fear of emasculation (Giles 25). The Narrator is especially angry at Marla when she starts attending these testicular cancer meetings, as if she’s taking away the last place where no women are allowed. The issue of gender is so pronounced in the novel that some of *Fight Club’s* critics regard it as being misogynistic, Collado-Rodríguez however proposes that these people have wrongly mistaken Tyler’s extreme worldview for the novel’s overall message (2).

In the novel, Palahniuk sees media as one of the greatest influences on the commodified ideal of masculinity, which few men are able to achieve. This inability to fulfill the narrowly defined masculine stereotype creates a great divide in men’s expectations of how they should behave and who they actually are, which leads to their disillusionment and fear (Mendieta 397).

2.3 Corporations

As has been touched upon earlier, mass media and corporations play a very important part in the novel. For Palahniuk, they are the main institutions that shape society and its future. The Narrator works for a ruthless car company, which among other things uses an algorithm to decide whether a recall of a defunct car model should be initiated or if it is cheaper to settle a law suit with customers. The Narrator is actually the one assessing fatal car crashes and is mentally and morally torn about his job, which further increases his self-hatred (Giles 24). Even though he doesn't like his job, he doesn't quit, at least not before he meets Tyler. However, the importance of the corporate world is evident even after

the Narrator loses his job. He and Tyler still operate in a corporate-like mindset, especially when organizing Project Mayhem. They even turn fight club into a sort of franchise (Giles 26). The influence of corporate world is also evident in the language the two main characters use, like when the Narrator mentions that his absent father “sets up a franchise” of family every six years (Palahniuk 50).

The importance Palahniuk places on corporations is clearly visible in this excerpt from *Fight Club*:

England named overseas places during its exploration and expansion of its Empire.

This way, when deep-space exploration ramps up, it will probably be the megatonic corporations that discover all the new planets and map them.

The IBM Stellar Sphere.

The Phillip Morris Galaxy.

Planet Denny's.

Every planet will take on the corporate identity of whoever rapes it first.

Budweiser World. (171)

Palahniuk puts corporations on the same level as countries and empires, because nowadays they are the real force behind world's progress and events.

Having described the characteristics of both Transcendentalism and the world of Palahniuk, it is important to investigate how these differences play a role in the treatment of three themes that are heavily featured in *Fight Club* and three selected works of Transcendentalism – rejection of materialism, rejection of authorities and the importance of individualism.

3. Fight Club and Transcendentalism - literary analyses

3.1 Rejection of materialism in *Fight Club* and Thoreau's *Walden*

In this chapter I will discuss the similarities and differences between *Fight Club* and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, concentrating mainly on its first chapter titled "Economy", which arguably refers to the problem of excessive materialism the most, though the theme permeates the whole work.

Walden, or Life in the Woods, published in 1854, is a description of Thoreau's solitary stay in a cabin by the Walden pond in Concord, Massachusetts, in the years 1845-1847. Throughout the book, Thoreau contemplates problems like the importance of self-reliance and self-sufficiency and also investigates the influence of materialism on human lives – he proposes ideas on how to distinguish what needs are essential and which are not. Thoreau actually built the cabin with his own hands and symbolically moved in it on July 4, 1845, on the day of the 68th anniversary of the United States' independence from Great Britain. In *Walden*, Thoreau describes the whole process of building his cabin and then his day-to-day life in great detail, as is in keeping with his aforementioned belief that one needs to apply his or her moral principles in practice. He addresses the issue early on by stating that it is not enough just to talk about society's problems and ideas for solving them, it is in fact necessary to live according to one's own ideals:

To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically. (13)

However, according to Gray it is important to point out that *Walden* isn't just an instruction on how to live, Thoreau describes every little detail and motive so thoroughly that readers can actually live vicariously through him (122). He follows his own ideas very responsibly and he closely relates all his experience during the stay in the countryside. His approach is so unique that readers and academics alike are unclear about what genre *Walden* belongs to

– the poet Robert Frost called it his “favorite poem” but it has also been labeled “an autobiography, a philosophical narrative, an ecological journal, [and] a spiritual diary” (Gray 123). Gray proposes that the book’s ambiguous genre reflects Transcendentalism’s view of individuality in that the writing is as unique as the author (123).

It is evident from the whole book that the materialistic culture of the day was in direct conflict with the Transcendentalist way of life (Phillips and Ladd 41). An example of Thoreau’s criticism of society’s obsession with possessions can be seen in the way he writes about his neighbors, who he often chastises for being concerned with meaningless interests. Right at the beginning of *Walden*, Thoreau asserts that “[t]he greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad” (10). Generally, he seems to think of himself as more enlightened than others when it comes to personal development. Like in *Walden*, Palahniuk in *Fight Club* is also very open about his dislike of material possessions. However, it could be argued that the Narrator is maybe less critical of his fellow consumers than Thoreau is. The Narrator counts himself in the group of people obsessed with owning things, for example, when he states that “[he] wasn't the only slave to [his] nesting instinct. The people [he] knows who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue” (43). Thoreau on the other hand distances himself from mainstream society and in a way feels to be morally superior to others (Hartman 206).

At the beginning of “Economy”, Thoreau opines that people should think differently about what material possessions they need and which ones they can do without. For Thoreau, necessity is whatever that is “important to human life that few, if any, whether from savageness, or poverty, or philosophy, ever attempt to do without it”, which he identifies as four types of objects – “Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel” (11). He declares that these four basic needs can usually be obtained from nature and therefore it doesn’t take much money to be able to live off the land, by which he means cheaply and above all in accordance with the Transcendentalist ideas. Thoreau deems other possessions simply unnecessary. He writes that “most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor” (13).

Similar sentiments can be found in *Fight Club*. The Narrator describes life he has lead so far as an ordinary existence of a relatively wealthy young professional who fills his life with possessions and equals them with his self-worth. He is not alone in this situation, he is one of the many victims of the “patriarchal American capitalism that advocates unchecked consumption” which capitalizes on this lack of purpose sensed by postmodern society (Giles 24). But as can be expected of consumerism, the acquisition of things offers only a short-term gratification and thus needs to be repeated often. Because of this fact the contemporary society sees material possessions as something vitally important and at the same time disposable. This problem is of course also discussed in *Fight Club*:

What Marla loves, she says, is all the things that people love intensely and then dump in an hour or a day after. The way a Christmas tree is the center of attention, then, after Christmas you see those dead Christmas trees with the tinsel still on them, dumped alongside the highway (67).

Thoreau likes to highlight the fact that most of people’s desires are created artificially just because they are swayed by society around them. He proposes that people mostly covet things just out of frustration and feelings of inadequacy when compared to their peers: “Most men appear never to have considered what a house is, and are actually though needlessly poor all their lives because they think that they must have such a one as their neighbors have” (27). However, when Thoreau refers to materialism, the readers have to keep in mind that he knows it on a much smaller scale than Palahniuk does. As I’ve discussed before, media and mass culture became the new religion in the Western postmodern society. They helped to intensify the whole system of consumerism and made the motives and expectations of individual consumers much more complicated. Nowadays everyone is a consumer and every one of these consumers wants to be simultaneously different and the same as everyone else. But being different and unique is also itself a commodity in the consumerist society (Mendieta 398). People get to be individualistic in a preapproved way and this perceived uniqueness makes everyone similar to everybody else. Palahniuk discusses this problem in several parts of the novel, one example is when he describes a set of dishes that were on purpose made to look like hand-made “with the tiny

bubbles and imperfections, little bits of sand, proof they were crafted by the honest, simple, hard-working indigenous aboriginal people of wherever” even though they were mass-produced (41). Palahniuk proposes that all flaws and diversions from normalcy are absorbed by the system and then sold back to consumers.

There are many descriptions of the postmodern desire to accumulate possessions in *Fight Club*. In one of them the Narrator describes his never-ending search for the perfectly furnished apartment:

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)

This passage puts forward the same sentiment as Thoreau calling most material possessions “hindrances”. Thoreau also addresses this problem when he states that “the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run” (24). In other words, for Thoreau it is only worth to own things he truly needs, otherwise this object just creates an obstacle in his life. It is safe to say that both Thoreau and Palahniuk perceive material possessions simply as something that is sucking life out of its owners. There are only few things worth putting time and money into. Or as the Narrator’s doorman eloquently puts it: “If you don't know what you want [...] you end up with a lot you don't” (46). And apparently this lot will not bring anything good to its owner.

When the Narrator talks about the explosion of his apartment that destroyed all his things, he mourns the possessions as if he lost a part of his identity. He says:

I loved my life. I loved that condo. I loved every stick of furniture that was my whole life. Everything, the lamps, the chairs, the rugs were me. The dishes in the cabinets were me. The plants were me. The television was me.

It was me that blew up. (110-11)

But as the readers and the Narrator later realize, it was him, or his alter-ego Tyler, who made the apartment explode. The Narrator just couldn't bring himself to do it directly because he wasn't able to part from his possessions that easily. He needed the rebellious Tyler to do it for him, just as was the case during various episodes in the novel, for example, when Tyler killed the Narrator's boss. When a detective investigating the explosion calls the Narrator, Palahniuk shares Tyler's inner monologue regarding the whole situation. He says that "[t]he liberator who destroys my property [...] is fighting to save my spirit. The teacher who clears all possessions from my path will set me free" (110). The readers don't know it yet but he is actually talking about himself.

As is evident from the previous paragraph, the Narrator describes his flat as being a source of his happiness. He doesn't really know that he actually suffers so much from having all those "hindrances" that he wishes his alter-ego to destroy it. When the Narrator calls Tyler to ask for a place to stay right after his flat explodes, he actually says to himself "[D]eliver me, Tyler, from being perfect and complete" (46). From these passages it can be inferred that the Narrator's state of mind before he meets Tyler is what Thoreau described with "[the] mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" when they subscribe to the consumerist lifestyle (8). Among other reasons, the Narrator subconsciously created Tyler in order to get out of that desperation.

So far, it is safe to say that the two works analyzed in this chapter have a similar take on the damaging effects of materialism. However, in the following section I get to a point which clearly divides the two works – that although both books reject materialism, they propose two distinct ways of how to deal with it. While Thoreau suggests merely ignoring and passively rejecting people's fascination with things by living on his own personal terms, *Fight Club* favors a more proactive and above all destructive approach. The nature of Thoreau's form of passive resistance will be later discussed in more detail in section 3.2.

In *Fight Club*, when the Narrator brutally mutilates the face of a young handsome man, aptly called Angel Face in the book, during one of the fights in the club, he explains his actions by saying that he just wanted to "destroy everything beautiful [he]'d never

have." (123) Kavaldo proposes that in *Fight Club* consumerism is exchanged for overt aggression and destruction and the characters' earlier "obsession of acquisition has turned into a desire for its removal" (107). It is out of the question for the characters to continue in their established ways or in a slightly more modest manner. It is necessary to cut all ties with the previous lifestyle, or in Tyler's words: "[i]t's only after you've lost everything (...) that you're free to do anything." (70). Because as I have argued before, all attempts at separating one's self from the mainstream consumer culture are seen as futile because the corporate-led marketing machine simply works attempted individuality in its own vision of the world. That's why it is so important for the characters of *Fight Club* to destroy the whole system and not just alter it.

The fact that the characters of *Fight Club* desire to violently destroy humanity's attachment to material possessions is not surprising given the overall theme of the novel. Their fascination with violence could be also seen as connected to the before-mentioned problems with establishing their masculine identity. Moreover, the Narrator's interest in death, represented most prominently by the support groups of terminally sick people, could also be a reflection of his stance on materialism, since death is the ultimate representation of nothingness. There are no material possessions in death.

For Palahniuk, the big dichotomy of our culture is that what is seen as a symbol of consumer culture could be at the same time used against it (Kavadlo 111). This is evident with Project Mayhem, which is trying to dismantle the mainstream corporate society from inside out, as is going to be described in greater detail in chapter 3.2. Furthermore, Palahniuk gives us numerous little tips and instructions on how to make things throughout the novel. Just in the first chapter he informs the readers on how to produce napalm:

The three ways to make napalm: One, you can mix equal parts of gasoline and frozen orange juice concentrate. Two, you can mix equal parts of gasoline and diet cola. Three, you can dissolve crumbled cat litter in gasoline until the mixture is thick.

Ask me how to make nerve gas. Oh, all those crazy car bombs. (13)

According to Kavadlo, passages like these highlight how Tyler and the Narrator use the

consumer society's own weapons and turn them against it - the soap made from human fat the two of them manufacture is a hidden wound to the consumerist culture. They shrewdly take what consumers strive to get rid of and then sell it back to them. What's more, as Tyler explains in another one of *Fight Club's* little tidbits of practical information, the ingredients for making soap can also be used to create dynamite. According to Tyler, "with enough soap [...] you could blow up the whole world" (73). In this way the soap serves as a symbol for undermining culture with objects that should normally be strengthening it (Kavadlo 111). As is typical of Thoreau, in *Walden* he gives us countless examples of practical knowledge and instructions on how to make things; how to build a house, how to farm land, and also how to economize; he makes meticulous lists of things he buys and money he spends. However, in contrast to *Fight Club*, Thoreau gives the readers instructions on how to create and not to destroy. Because for Thoreau, and most likely for other Transcendentalists, the way to rid humanity of desire to own is through the improvement of individuals and not by waging an open war against consumer culture.

Hartman observes that in *Walden* Thoreau is positioning himself as a sort of an everyman. Even though that in certain aspects he seems to think himself better than others, he doesn't shy away from writing about himself in an unfavorable light (Hartman 206). He asserts that he is only as good or as bad as other people: "If I seem to boast more than is becoming, my excuse is that I brag for humanity rather than for myself; and my shortcomings and inconsistencies do not affect the truth of my statement" (37). The Narrator of *Fight Club* could be also regarded as an everyman-like character since the readers aren't really given that much background information about him. By representing the books' protagonists in this way, Thoreau and the Narrator can stand in for any and every member of society. This is true even in the case of *Fight Club's* characters, who are portrayed as being far from ordinary, because as Kavadlo points out, Palahniuk's characters are not merely presented as likeable sociopaths. They represent everyday people who are fed up with society's artificial rules and in this way Palahniuk illustrates that "our culture creates the means for its own people to turn against it" (Kavadlo 108).

When Thoreau preaches that less is more and that people should concentrate on acquiring spiritual wealth rather than material possessions, he goes right against the mantra of the capitalist thought. He proposes that it is essential to simplify one's needs in order to

have more "time and energy to pursue transcendental reality" (Schneider 96). It is interesting to note that he not only goes against the abstract ideals of the capitalist ideology, he also directly confronts the concrete ideas of the economists Jean-Baptiste Say and Adam Smith (Schneider 99).

As was touched upon in one of the previous paragraphs, Thoreau regards time as the greatest capital of all. He explains this on an example of a friend proposing that Thoreau would save time if he traveled by train and not by foot, like he customarily did. Thoreau however opines that he saves time by walking because he doesn't lose it by having to work to have money for the train ticket:

I say to my friend, Suppose we try who will get there first. The distance is thirty miles; the fare ninety cents. That is almost a day's wages. I remember when wages were sixty cents a day for laborers on this very road. Well, I start now on foot, and get there before night; I have travelled at that rate by the week together. You will in the meanwhile have earned your fare, and arrive there some time tomorrow, or possibly this evening, if you are lucky enough to get a job in season. Instead of going to Fitchburg, you will be working here the greater part of the day. (39-40)

Despite his criticism of people's need to work to be able to afford material possessions, Thoreau is not against work per se. After all, he managed to build his own house and survived in a cabin by himself for two years. The fact is that Thoreau distinguishes between work for financial gain and what he perceives as meaningful work. He opines that if people were to want fewer things, it would be easier for them to work less. He stresses that after getting rid of the necessity to work, any activity becomes "not a hardship but a pastime" (51). Another example of Thoreau's opinions about work is when he discusses that the majority of his neighbors don't own their houses but they have mortgages instead. He writes that "[t]he man who has actually paid for his farm with labor on it is so rare that every neighbor can point to him" (25). Thoreau, who owns his house, proposes that his working on construction of the house actually sets him free from

obligations. Like with the things he labels as necessary, work has its own merit when done purposefully. Thoreau deems working just for the sake of making money useless.

Palahniuk holds the same opinion about work as Thoreau does. In *Fight Club*, having a job, especially the corporate kind of job, is not praiseworthy. When Tyler is threatened with getting fired from one of his service jobs he says to his employer that "getting fired is the best thing that could happen to any of us [...] that way we'd quit treading water and do something with our lives" (83). But despite his opinion, Tyler is not against hard work when he thinks it's meaningful, for example the mechanics of Project Mayhem actually work very hard on their tasks. I will further discuss the case of Project Mayhem's whole operation in the next chapter.

Schneider agrees with other authors who think that *Walden* is a book full of conflict. Thoreau talks about being as self-sufficient as possible and rejecting materialism but at the same time he also wants to sell his ideas in a book. According to Schneider, *Walden* is a book that "attacks capitalism, by an author who presumably hopes to make at least a modest profit from his book" (104). There is also the fact that Thoreau leaves Walden after two years and becomes once again "a sojourner in civilized life" (*Walden 2*). In the same way Tyler selling overpriced soap is part of what Vickroy calls "hypocritical capitalism" (72). According to Klinge, there is a certain hypocrisy with critics of consumerism, because while they attack it, for the most part they still live in it and take advantage of its achievements (95).

Clearly, Thoreau and Palahniuk share some of the ideas in regards to their contempt with materialism. However, as is characteristic for the respective cultural climates in which the two works were created, *Fight Club's* ideas about how to stop consumerism are more violent than the ones proposed in *Walden*.

3.2 Rejection of authorities in *Fight Club* and Thoreu's "Civil Disobedience"

Having established *Fight Club's* and Thoreau's stance on materialism, it is now important to examine their relationship towards other types of power structures than that of capitalism and desire for possessions. In this part, I will analyze another of Thoreau's works, in this case it will be his 1849 essay "Civil Disobedience".

This essay was originally delivered as a lecture before the Concord Lyceum in 1848. It first appeared in writing under the title “Resistance to Civil Government” a year later, but in subsequent editions it bears the name “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” or in its shortened form simply “Civil Disobedience” (Rossi xi). It is a treatise on the absurdity of governments expecting total obedience from their citizens. Thoreau disagrees with the fact that leaders of state should be regarded as the highest authority; he actually wants people to rebel against the government’s demands if they are wrong or unjust. He proposes that an individual has to obey the “higher law” of his or her own moral principle even when it is in contrast with the rules of the government (Phillips and Ladd 125). This idea of taking person’s opinions as the highest of laws is in accordance with the Transcendentalist belief in the authority of the individual, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Thoreau was inspired to write “Civil Disobedience” after spending a night in jail after refusing to pay a poll tax. He purposely decided to ignore the payment because he didn't want to support a government that was involved in the Mexican War, which was in his opinion just a guise for Southern slaveholders to get more land (Gray 125). He felt that by supporting this war he would actually support slavery, which he was deeply against. It is interesting to note that his arrest and subsequent stay in jail actually occurred while he was living by the Walden pond (Schneider 103).

As was mentioned in previous sections, the fight against authorities is an essential part of *Fight Club*. It is however important to state that while Thoreau in “Civil Disobedience” sees the government as the main perpetrator of cruelty against people, in *Fight Club* there is actually no mention of the government or politicians. Here I get to the main point of difference between the two texts – it is symptomatic of our age that the government is no longer the ultimate enemy, it is rather seen as being subservient to the much powerful forces of media, corporations, and mainstream culture, which was already argued in chapter 2. Tyler actually proclaims the fight against culture the greatest war of our generation when he says that “[w]e 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 the culture. The great depression is our lives” (149).

While Thoreau addresses his critique to the government, he is in fact against all big

institutions that don't follow moral principles of individuals. He writes that while a corporation or another institution cannot really be expected to be moral, people a corporation consists of should be subjected to the same standards of moral conduct as other private individuals: "[I]t is truly enough said that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation *with* a conscience." ("Civil Disobedience" 228). While the government and corporations are different manifestations of authority, the sentiment remains the same. Neither Thoreau nor Palahniuk want to grant absolute power to any institution.

In the previous chapter I discussed *Fight Club's* stance on work which can be summed up by saying that working for money is useless and soul-destroying. But it also can be a way in which to bring the system down from the inside. Tyler, later together with other mechanics of Project Mayhem, works menial jobs in the service industry with the aim of undermining the wealthy employers by exercising little acts of rebellion, like when he leaves a note in his employer's bathroom that he urinated in one of her numerous perfume bottles. In other words, Project Mayhem can be regarded as a sort of mutiny of those who are in a subservient position – the “guerilla terrorists of the service industry” and “renegade waiters” (Palahniuk 81). They create the building blocks of capitalism and at the same time are destructing it from the inside. At one point in the novel, Tyler actually addresses the wealthy people directly:

Remember this. [...] The people you're trying to step on, we're everyone you depend on. We're the people who do your laundry and cook your food and serve your dinner. We make your bed. We guard you while you're asleep. We drive the ambulances. We direct your call. We are cooks and taxi drivers and we know everything about you. We process your insurance claims and credit card charges. We control every part of your life. (166)

As was argued in chapter 2, fight clubs and Project Mayhem ironically function like corporations. I've mentioned the fact that Tyler starts setting up franchises when the original fight club becomes popular. Another example of following standards of corporate world is the existence of Project Mayhem's committees, which seem to mimic the

organized structure of the corporate world:

Arson meets on Monday.

Assault on Tuesday.

Mischief meets on Wednesday.

And Misinformation meets on Thursday.

Organized Chaos. *The Bureaucracy of Anarchy*. (119)

However dangerous and violent Project Mayhem's operation is, Kavadlo proposes that the Narrator's work for a car company might be even more lethal for society because it represents the real ruthlessness of the corporate system (Kavadlo 108). This points to the fact that has been already mentioned several times in this thesis – that corporations are only interested in maximizing profits and have no use for morals (Mendieta 396). As was argued before, Thoreau also regards this as one of the drawbacks of big institutions.

However, here lies another difference of the two works, one that I have also already mentioned. While Thoreau imagines the fight against the system as some form of passive resistance, the protagonists of *Fight Club* choose destruction as their path to both personal and social liberty. Even though Thoreau states that "[u]nder a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison" he by no means wants people to take drastic violent actions in order to get arrested (236). He rebels against the system by not doing and not by active resistance. In *Fight Club*, the backlash against authorities starts as small acts of revolt. Apart from Tyler possibly urinating in his employer's perfume, another example of these covert acts of disobedience is when he gets a job as a projectionist and starts splicing pornographic images into children's movies (Giles 28). This type of invisible fight is, however, exacerbated as the story progresses and the characters move up to actual violent fights against big institutions.

It is safe to say that Thoreau probably wouldn't condone this kind of resistance. For him, the core of a political fight is rejection of partaking in the activities of a government that proposes wrongful actions. It is vital that citizens completely distance themselves from an unjust government, be it by not paying certain taxes or by quitting their job if it in any way supports the government: "What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend

myself to the wrong which I condemn” (234). This doesn’t mean that Thoreau expects everyone to be actively engaged in politics. However, if a citizen doesn’t want to take part in it, he simply shouldn’t support it at all, not even passively:

It is not a man’s duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous, wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support. (232-3)

As was mentioned before, Thoreau asserts that citizens are only responsible for being true to their own ideals: “[T]he only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right.” (228). The theme of individualism, that is so pronounced in the Transcendentalist thought, plays an important part in creating a just government. It can be inferred from “Civil Disobedience” that institutions have the capacity to behave justly if the individuals that from it behave in a moral way.

When Thoreau states that “[t]here will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly” (246) it is evident that he is not against removing the government completely. He calls for “not at once no government, but *at once* a better government” (228). According to him, a good government would minimize its direct influence on the lives of its citizens, because “[t]hat government is best which governs least” (227). One of the reasons for this might lie in Thoreau’s ideas on equality and social justice. He thinks that the government supports the views of the majority not because the majority is automatically right, but because it is simply stronger and more influential than minorities. Thoreau sees this problem as one of the pitfalls of democratic governments, an issue which needs to be improved upon.

The fact that Thoreau is willing to continue in the existing system goes against views presented in *Fight Club*, which are more in favor of completely destroying the present social and political structures. The fact that Thoreau didn’t want to change the whole political foundation is however not that surprising given that the US government was

relatively new and still had room for improvement.

It needs to be noted that Thoreau changed his mind about the efficiency of passive resistance later in his life. According to Gray, the change was influenced by Thoreau's taking part in an attempted slave revolt which resulted in several deaths (Gray 125). After this incident Thoreau admitted on several occasions that there are things worth fighting and dying for after all, things like freedom and equality (Phillips and Ladd 126).

Another authority Palahniuk isn't that fond of are media which are closely connected to materialism. Media actually function as the system's vehicle for propagating the flawed status quo and creating feelings of inadequacy in its consumers. Tyler criticizes them in the following excerpt:

You have a class of young strong men and women, and they want to give their lives to something. Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they don't need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need (149).

Advertising isn't that widespread during the mid-19th century so equivalents of this sentiment are missing in "Civil Disobedience". We know that Thoreau speaks against popular press in *Walden* but that is in no way comparable with today's media (Sattelmeyer 69). But it is probably correct to infer that Thoreau wouldn't be so fond of modern advertising and media from what he wrote about materialism in *Walden*.

Another aspect that *Fight Club* rebels against is the figure of the absent father, which I have covered in chapter 2. As was already pointed out, the absence of father figures is a central theme of the novel. Similar motifs are not really present in "Civil Disobedience" given that it is a political essay. However, if the fact that in *Fight Club* father figures are very often equated with God is taken into account, we can find some connections between the two texts. For example, when the Narrator gets admitted in a mental institution at the end of the story, he thinks he's in Heaven and mistakes his doctor for God. It is because in the novel the father figure is always seen as the main authority, like when one of Project Mayhem's mechanics says that "[i]f you're male and you're Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never know your

father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do you believe about God?" (Palahniuk 141).

In "Civil Disobedience", Thoreau doesn't really talk about God but he does mention the word in several parts of the essay. In these passages he describes God as the moral superiority of the individual, for example when he writes that people should not support their government if they themselves "have God on their side" (235). The fact that the truth is always on the side of the individual is in keeping with the Transcendentalist thought.

Going back to *Fight Club's* comparison of father figures to godlike authorities, the characters' violent behavior could be seen simply as means for getting attention of these authorities, which these men had previously been robbed of when they grew up without a father. Tyler thinks it is better to get attention for being bad than getting no attention at all, when he asks: "If you could be either God's worst enemy or nothing, which would you choose?" (141). The right answer is that God's hate is better than his indifference.

We are God's middle children, according to Tyler Durden, with no special place in history and no special attention.

Unless we get God's attention, we have no hope of damnation or redemption. Which is worse, hell or nothing?

Only if we're caught and punished can we be saved. (141).

In the last pages of his essay, Thoreau gives an actual account of his night in prison. He recounts how transformed he felt by this experience: "I saw yet more distinctly the State in which I lived" (241). According to Kazin it just shows how sheltered Thoreau's life had previously been – Thoreau wasn't ever really discriminated against and was financially rather secure (Kazin 110). His stay in prison was a first shock to his firm belief that a person can be truly free. On the other hand, the Narrator of *Fight Club* seems to be acutely aware of the injustice the system perpetrates.

To complete the comparison of the two works portrayed in this thesis, it is important to mention one significant aspect they share. Similar to the Transcendentalist thought, the characters of *Fight Club* are against the influence of history on current affairs. They actually express the desire to destroy all ties with history and its cultural inheritance and

create brand new ones. The aim of Project Mayhem is at one point described as wanting to “blast the world free of history” (Palahniuk 124). The Narrator then further elaborates on how much contempt he has for the past: “I wanted to burn the Louvre. I'd do the Elgin Marbles with a sledgehammer and wipe my ass with the Mona Lisa. This is my world, now. This is my world, my world, and those ancient people are dead” (124). In “Civil Disobedience” Thoreau touches upon the problem of taking routine processes and historical institutions as the main authorities when he says that “[t]his American government— what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity?” (227). Even though the Transcendentalists weren't that fond of history, it is safe to say that most of them wouldn't approve of its violent and brutal destruction. But this is in keeping with the differences between the two periods described in this thesis.

In this section I have compared Palahniuk's and Thoreau's views on authorities. Even though they both reject them to a certain degree, their areas of interest don't seem to overlap at first sight. While Palahniuk tackles mostly issues connected to the power of corporations and personal authorities, Thoreau deals with the theme of politics. This could be due to the limitations of the chosen subject matter or because Thoreau simply didn't have to concern himself with social phenomena that are typical of the turn of the millennium. However, this doesn't mean that the two works completely differ or contradict each other when it comes to the theme of authorities. They are both against the ultimate power of institutions which behave like immoral machines. In the next section I get to one type of authority both *Fight Club's* characters and Transcendentalists are quite partial to – the power of the individual.

3.3 Importance of individualism in *Fight Club* and Emerson's "Self-Reliance"

As was hinted on in chapter 1, the emphasis on individuality and the belief that every person should act as the highest authority is a common aspect of the majority of Transcendentalist writing. This assertion goes hand in hand with the rejection of material possessions and authorities. The true genius of an individual simply cannot shine through if it's being clouded by anything but his or her own judgment.

For this chapter, I have chosen Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1841 essay "Self-Reliance" to represent this aspect of the Transcendentalist thought. Emerson had been a proponent of individualism since the beginning of his career. The invincible power of the individual, or what Gura calls "radical individualism", was in fact an integral aspect of Emerson's Transcendentalism. In Emerson's belief there could be no betterment of society without the improvement of its individual parts. In one of his pieces he asserts that "[t]here can be no concert in two, where there is no concert in one" (Gura 211). However, it needs to be noted that Emerson's approach to individualism was one that was bordering with the extreme. His critics and adherents alike sometimes saw his ideas about self-reliance and individualism as being too self-indulgent and egocentric (Gura 212).

In his essay on Emerson's idea of self-reliance, Harold Bloom likens it to a kind of American religion, as something ingrained in the very core of the culture (Bloom 95). It is not hard to agree with this opinion especially if it's being studied in a novel like *Fight Club*. As I will argue throughout this chapter, the importance of living according to one's own rules is a crucial component of the novel. However, as it is apparent with other aspects in *Fight Club*, the circumstances and the outcome of such living don't always prove to be positive. This could be argued as being symptomatic of the times in which the respective pieces were written, as was described in previous parts of this thesis. At the turn of the millennium the optimism of Transcendentalist thinkers was gone and the future no longer seemed bright and full of promise. However, despite *Fight Club's* dark story, Mendieta admits that Palahniuk's belief in the ability of an individual to live on his own terms can be thought of as motivated by Emersonian optimism (407).

There is no denying that Emerson thought that to live according to one's own rules was an obligation for every individual. "Self-Reliance" is full of statements that support this. One of them could be found among the first sentences of the essay: "[t]o believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, — that is genius" (1163) or "[W]hoso would be a man must be a nonconformist" (1165).

According to Emerson people don't live fully unless they trust their own judgment. If a person doesn't do that, he or she becomes a part of a "mob" of people who don't think for themselves (1173). In the first paragraphs of his essay, Emerson warns against taking the opinions and moral principles of others at face value. One simply cannot lower his or

her standards of how things should be.

In *Fight Club* this is accentuated almost as profusely, though to a different effect. The message of individualism doesn't seem to be as black and white to Palahniuk as it is to Emerson. This can be inferred from the rather dark twist at the end of Palahniuk's novel when the Narrator realizes Tyler is just a figment of his imagination. The validity of Tyler's message regarding the importance of individuality could be then seen as compromised. However, there are aspects which are in direct accordance with Emerson's line of thought. For example, the fact that the members of Project Mayhem are seen as being just anonymous worker bees despite the fact that they adhere to Taylor's individualistic principles. Readers don't even learn the names of most of them because the narrator calls them mechanics or space monkeys. They blindly fulfill Tyler's orders because not asking questions is "the first rule in Project Mayhem" (122). Even though they reject the mainstream society they simply exchange it for Tyler Durden's philosophy and they actually have no ideas of their own (Kavadlo 108).

Although both Emerson and Palahniuk agree that human beings need to get rid of the influence of society to improve their lives, there is an important difference between Emerson's and Palahniuk's view of people. They use the same means to arrive to a different destination. For Emerson an individual needs to shake off the outside pressures to find his or her true uniqueness. Palahniuk doesn't see people as being special at all. For him it is important for individuals to get rid of the inessential things in order to realize that they are not special or unique. Everyone is in fact ordinary. When the doctor at the end of the story asks the Narrator why he and his followers perpetrated all the violent attacks, he uses what resembles Emersonian rhetoric when he asks "Didn't [you] realize that each of us is a sacred, unique snowflake of special unique specialness?" (207). This seems to be a mockery of the type of fake sense of individuality which is often prescribed by modern media and marketing. It is not surprising when the Narrator answers the doctor's question with the following assertion:

We are not special.

We are not crap or trash, either.

We just are. (207)

Palahniuk's protagonists simply reject the hypocrisy of mainstream culture which promotes this commodified version of individuality.

Palahniuk's view is contrasted by Emerson's optimistic belief in the human spirit, which is being highlighted in this excerpt:

And truly it demands something godlike in him who has cast off the common motives of humanity, and has ventured to trust himself for a taskmaster. High be his heart, faithful his will, clear his sight, that he may in good earnest be doctrine, society, law, to himself, that a simple purpose may be to him as strong as iron necessity is to others! (1174)

There is also a difference in how Emerson and Palahniuk see the way in which people should free themselves from the limitations of society. For Emerson people should shed the inessential expectations of society and be true to themselves. They should then improve themselves and cultivate what they've been given by nature:

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. (1164)

In this excerpt Emerson states the importance of hard work and striving for improvement as a way to lead a better life as an enlightened individual.

For Palahniuk the solution to freeing oneself is the exact opposite – not by improving but by destruction. Or as the Narrator puts it: “Maybe self-improvement isn't the answer. [...] Maybe self-destruction is the answer” (49). For Tyler it's important to “hit the bottom” and “run from self-improvement” because it is only after a disaster that people can be “resurrected” (70). The Narrator comes to realize we need to “break everything to make something better out of ourselves” (52). Mendieta states that Palahniuk's heroes live the

reversed versions of a Bildungsroman – they are disentangling themselves from the ways society has created them (395). This self-destruction is almost treated like a sacred practice given that the characters use religious rhetoric when discussing it, like when it is stated that “only through destroying myself I can discover the great power of my spirit” (110). Emerson also uses numerous examples of spiritual rhetoric in his writing, like when he describes self-reliance as “the divinity in man” (1175) or when he states that one kind of “false prayers are our regrets” (1176). We can also observe the importance of “hitting the bottom” when the Narrator goes to cancer support groups to feel satisfied with his life. The people who go to these meeting have lost everything, and the narrator can interact with them in a genuine way, even though he is actually an impostor because he himself isn't dying of cancer.

This is why I loved the support groups so much, if people thought you were dying, they gave you their full attention.

If this might be the last time they saw you, they really saw you. Everything else about their checkbook balance and radio songs and messy hair went out the window.

You had their full attention.

People listened instead of just waiting for their turn to speak.

And when they spoke, they weren't telling you a story. When the two of you talked, you were building something, and afterward you were both different than before. (107)

As I argued before, the Narrator attends these meetings in his quest to find some form of authentic relationships, which is missing in his life. The Transcendentalists were also trying to find authenticity in life, but in contrast to the Narrator, they mainly searched for it in Nature, self-reliance, and individuality.

It has already been established that according to Emerson a person's own judgment should bear the highest authority. This even applies in a case when a person is doing something that could be seen as negative or malevolent. In his essay he writes that “[n]o law can be sacred to me but that of my nature [...] the only right is what is after my

constitution, the only wrong what is against it” (1165). According to Emerson people should be able to do the things they want to do if they are true to their authentic selves. Another example of this is when Emerson laments the futility of giving money to charity. “Are they *my* poor?” he exclaims when he states that people are not responsible for the happiness of others (1166).

In *Fight Club* there certainly are instances when the main characters seem not to care about anyone but themselves. They have no problem stealing a bag full of fat Marla keeps for her mother. Throughout the book they lie, steal and cheat on people. Later in the novel Tyler's followers feel no remorse when they are blowing up buildings in the name of Project Mayhem. However, it has to be noted that these pranks and attacks are aimed at the institutions of corporate America that in Tyler's opinion oppress everyone.

One question remains to be answered — if individualism is so important what role does society have? And is society ever capable of real change? According to Gura Emerson saw individualism as a way to improve the whole society. It cannot get better without the improvement of each and every individual that exists within its limits, however arrogant and extravagant their effort might seem (Gura 211). But there are also passages in which Emerson clearly condemns society, like when he states that “society never advances” (1178). He also thinks that “[S]ociety everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members” (1165). It is unclear if in these statements he describes society in its current state and if a collective of already enlightened individuals could create an ideal society. The same question applies to *Fight Club*. By the end of the novel it is unclear if Palahniuk sees society as being capable of real change. Mendieta thinks this is not the case when he states that in the realm of *Fight Club* “deviance is the health of the individual in a sick society” (395). However, the readers cannot be sure of that since the ending is rather ambivalent. The Narrator finds himself in a mental institution where he sees his caretakers as allies of Project Mayhem who promise him they will set him free. Then in one of the last lines of the novel one of these alleged mechanics says that “we're going to break up civilization so we can make something better out of it” (208). Kavadlo proposes that however ominous the sentence might seem, it's not really a menace but rather a promise of things getting better – of not just destroying but of recreating and recycling (107).

Individualism and self-reliance are very important for both Emerson and Palahniuk.

However, they propose a different way in which an individual can achieve it. For Emerson the way for an individual to reach the highest level of individuality is through personal development. One has to realize his or her own uniqueness and potential and then work towards it by shedding the influence of society. Palahniuk, on the other hand, isn't that optimistic about human individuality. Although he also sees the need for individuals to get rid of societal pressures, he opines that people are not that special, they are in fact all ordinary. The way to authentic life is to simply stop the pretense by destroying the institutions that propagate the status quo of materialistic society.

Conclusion

The Transcendentalist movement of the mid-19th century was an important part of American literary and philosophical history. It also served as a significant source of criticism of society of the time. Some of its main tenets and ideas can also be found in the 1996 novel *Fight Club* of the American writer Chuck Palahniuk. In this thesis, I set out to find similarities and differences between works written during these two seemingly dissimilar time periods. It was not my intention to find distinct connections and immediate influences between them but rather to define some of the traits that are similar and analyze in what ways they differ and what might be its cause.

In the first part of this paper, I described the historical and social frameworks that Transcendentalism arose from. One of the main influences was the rapid expansion of the relatively young nation, both political and geographical. This quick progress caused Americans to feel optimistic about the country's future and also helped to instill in them the belief in the ability of an individual to transcend his or her life circumstances. After establishing the historical background of the times, I described life experiences that shaped the opinions of Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the main representatives of the movement, who created most of its philosophical foundation.

The second chapter discussed the social changes that have shaped Palahniuk's writing, especially the phenomena described in *Fight Club*. I identified three main aspects that help form the story – growing loneliness of individuals, the loss of traditional polarity of gender and the power corporations have over people's lives.

In chapter 3 I analyzed three Transcendentalist works, each with a specific aspect in mind, and contrasted them with the way this problem is dealt with in *Fight Club*. The first of the three analyses was concerned with Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, especially its first chapter titled "Economy", and its portrayal of materialism. First, I discussed the origin and background of *Walden*. Then I tried to find similarities between the two works with regards to materialism and found out that they actually had many points in common. However, one major difference was the way in which the two texts propose to deal with this phenomenon. Thoreau's approach is mere rejection of unnecessary possessions, while *Fight Club* preaches total eradication of materialism. This is in keeping with the overall theme of

the novel and with the depiction of society it proposes.

The second one of the literary analyses attempted to draw a comparison between *Fight Club* and another one of Thoreau's works, this time an essay titled "Civil Disobedience", and their stance on authorities. At first sight, the concept of authority in both works varies significantly. While Thoreau takes state institutions as being the main oppressive force, Palahniuk doesn't mention the government at all. This is not surprising given that at the turn of the millennium the government is not regarded as the most powerful institution, it is seen as being easily swayed by wealthy corporations and mass media which Palahniuk depicts as the ultimate adversaries. Palahniuk also deals with the issue of authorities on a more personal level, an aspect that Thoreau doesn't discuss at all. I argued that while the two works differ on this point, they are both against granting absolute power to big institutions. However, there is a difference in which the two authors propose to stand up against authorities. Thoreau firmly believes that institutions can be improved upon, so he prescribes refusing to partake in affairs of an unjust government as the answer. On the other hand, Palahniuk's characters see destruction and violence as the only viable forms of resistance.

The third analysis compared Palahniuk's novel with Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance". First, I briefly mentioned Emerson's relationship towards individualism, which actually many of the other Transcendentalist thinkers saw as too extreme. Palahniuk on the other hand isn't so clear about the importance of individualism. This is in part due to the fact that the main advocate of individualism in the novel turns out to be just a figment of the Narrator's imagination and in this way the validity of his message becomes compromised. A major difference between the two texts is the proposed way of getting rid of society's influence. According to Thoreau, it is necessary for an individual to improve as a person, while the characters of *Fight Club* choose violence and destruction as their path to personal freedom. This characteristic of *Fight Club* clearly became a pattern in my analysis.

Although seemingly different, Transcendentalism and *Fight Club* actually share certain similarities. They both reject the way in which individuals mindlessly follow society's rules and they place great importance on finding authenticity amidst the artificial demands of their respective cultures. They also share similar ideas on the topics of individualism, materialism, and authorities. The theoretical knowledge about the respective

periods and the literary analyses proposed in this thesis also uncovered the ways in which the literary works differ when dealing with these three topics. The main difference seems to be in the chosen path to personal freedom and liberation of individuals from the oppressive forces of authorities. While during the times of Transcendentalism, there was a widespread belief in the improvement of humanity, in the postmodern times of Palahniuk the outlook is rather bleak. It's as if in *Fight Club* the characters have given up on things getting better without a drastic intervention. Palahniuk's characters simply seem more desperate and jaded than Emerson and Thoreau, which still saw improvement within the limits of the current political and social climate as possible.

Works Cited

Primary Sources:

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Self-Reliance". *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*.

Gen. ed. Nina Baym. 7th ed. Vol. B. New York: Norton, 2007. 1163-1180. Print.

Thoreau, Henry David. "On Civil Disobedience." *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other*

Writings. Ed. William Rossi. 3rd ed. New York: Norton, 2008. 227-247. Print.

---. "Walden." *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*. Ed. William Rossi. 3rd ed.

New York: Norton, 2008. 5-224. Print.

Palahniuk, Chuck. *Fight Club: A Novel*. New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1996. Print.

Secondary Sources:

Bloom, Harold. "Emerson: The American Religion." *Bloom's Modern Critical*

Interpretations: Emerson's Essays. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 2006. 95-124. PDF file.

Collado-Rodríguez, Francisco. "Introduction: Chuck Palahniuk and the Posthuman Being."

Chuck Palahniuk : Fight club, Invisible monsters, Choke. Ed. Francisco Collado-Rodríguez. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 11-17. Print.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England." *American*

Transcendentalism Web. Web. 10 Apr. 2016.

---. "The Transcendentalist." *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo*

Emerson. Ed. Brooks Atkinson. New York: The Modern Library, 1950. 87-103. PDF File.

Giles, James R. "Violence, Spaces, and a Fragmenting Consciousness in *Fight Club*." *Chuck*

Palahniuk : Fight club, Invisible monsters, Choke. Ed. Francisco Collado-Rodríguez. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 23-43. Print.

Gray, Richard. *A History of American Literature*. 2nd ed. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

Print.

Gura, Philip. F. *American Transcendentalism: A History*. London: Macmillan, 2008. Print.

Hartman, Steven. "The Life Excited: Faces of Thoreau in *Walden*." *Henry David Thoreau*.

Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007. 197-218. PDF file.

- Kavadlo, Jesse. "With Us or Against Us: Chuck Palahniuk's 9/11." *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem*. Ed. Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Rubin. New York: Routledge, 2009. 103-115. Print.
- Kazin, Albert. "Writing in the Dark." *Bloom's Literary Themes: Civil Disobedience*. Ed. Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010. 101-116. PDF file.
- Klinge, Matthew W. "Spaces of Consumption in Environmental History." *History and Theory* 42.4 (2003): 94-110. PDF file.
- Kuhn, Cynthia, and Lance Rubin. "Introduction." *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem*. Ed. Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Rubin. New York: Routledge, 2009. 1-5. Print.
- Mendieta, Eduardo. "Surviving American Culture: On Chuck Palahniuk." *Philosophy and Literature* 29.2 (2005): 394-408. PDF file.
- Palahniuk, Chuck. "Fact and Fiction: An Introduction." *Stranger than Fiction: True Stories*. New York: Doubleday, 2004. EPUB file.
- Phillips, Jerry and Andrew Ladd. "Transcendentalism." *Romanticism and Transcendentalism: (1800-1860)*. Ed. Jerry Phillips. New York: Facts on File, 2006. 30-41. PDF file.
- Reynolds, Larry, J. and Tibbie E. Lynch. "Sense and Transcendence in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman". *The South Central Bulletin* 39.4 (1979): 148-151. PDF file.
- Rossi, William. A Note on the Texts. *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*. By Henry David Thoreau. Ed. William Rossi. 3rd ed. New York: Norton, 2008. Print.
- Sattelmeyer, Robert. "From A Week to Walden." *Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007. 63-86. PDF file.
- Schneider, Richard J. "Walden." *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. Joel Myerson. Cambridge University Press, 1995. 92-107. PDF file.
- Vickroy, Laurie. "Body Contact: Acting Out is the Best Defense in Fight Club." *Chuck Palahniuk : Fight club, Invisible monsters, Choke*. Ed. Francisco Collado-Rodríguez. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 61-75. Print.