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## THE DARKNESS WITHIN US: POSTMODERN GOTHIC IN CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S *FIGHT CLUB*

The genre of Postmodern Gothic represents a postmodern incarnation of the traditional Gothic genre and it includes traditional Gothic elements although somewhat modified and upgraded. In essence, it represents a specific fusion between the Gothic genre and postmodernist traits. In this paper, such reinvented Gothic elements are discussed using the example of Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club*. All the major Gothic elements (such as the setting, the Gothic hero and heroine, the doppelganger and the like) are depicted in this novel with particular stress on subjectivity and the element of terror since these are perhaps the biggest deviations from the traditional set of characteristics of the Gothic genre. Furthermore, another theoretical framework appears to be of great significance for the interpretation of this novel – Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality. The traditional Gothic story is thus dislocated and belongs to a reality that is overtly estranged from the actual, factual reality, yet it does not necessarily belong to the realm of the supernatural either. With such unique fusion of different theoretical frameworks, Palahniuk's novel serves as perhaps one of the best representatives of the Postmodern Gothic genre.

Key words: Postmodern Gothic, Gothic elements, hyperreality, *Fight Club*, novel

We stopped checking for monsters under our bed  
when we realized they were inside us.  
- *The Dark Knight*

In the contemporary era, the Gothic genre has a rather significant position within the scope of popular culture, surpassing the borders of literature and architecture that originally limited it, and affecting everything from cinema and television to media in general. It could be said that, even though the Gothic genre as such (that is its essence as set in the eighteenth century) was always appealing and interesting to wide audiences, its contemporary incarnation that went through some kind of merger with Postmodernism has been a far more prominent part of the contemporary culture.

Postmodern Gothic represents an interaction between Postmodernism and the Gothic genre, and it is based on a shared trait – their concern with the sublime

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and the unrepresentable. In a postmodern manner, one of the most important characteristics of the genre is its subjectivity; the subjective manner of narration and representation of reality. Naturally, this invokes much greater concern with creating psychological profiles of the characters; Postmodern Gothic focuses on the inner state of the characters and finds all the characteristic truly gloomy and frightening elements within, rather than without one's mind. Furthermore, from such focus comes the shift of predominance between horror and terror, in favor of the latter. Beville, among others, identifies "the sublime effects of terror as the heart of Gothic and Gothic-postmodernist literary exploration" (Beville, 2009: 15).

While Postmodern Gothic preserves most of the original Gothic elements of the traditional Gothic novel, many of these traditional Gothic elements are modified and many are parodied, whereas some of them are even completely surpassed or reinvented. Concerning its predominant motifs, Postmodern Gothic frequently focuses on the motif of the doppelgänger, which may be considered to be an echo of the famous traditionally Gothic masterpiece that is Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. However, as opposed to the original fashion of representing the doppelgänger as a separate physical being, within Postmodern Gothic, such a double is seemingly put within one person, thus showing a psychological rather than any other split of character, as is the case with Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*.

Palahniuk's novel is perhaps one of the most famous works of Postmodern Gothic, partly owing to its great success in film; specifically as Fincher's well-known cinematic adaptation of the novel. The novel, and thus the movie, follows the mundane life of a nameless narrator who soon encounters his doppelgänger embodied in Tyler Durden. In the novel, the whole experience of the narrator who goes through a psychological split is presented in a Baudrillardian postmodern fashion, introducing another postmodern aspect to Postmodern Gothic – the inevitable debate over what is real and what is non-real. The narrator, who is often referred to as Jack or Joe even though neither the novel nor the movie states these as his name (but based on his catchphrases "I am Jack's [...]" in the movie or "I am Joe's [...]" in the novel), presents us with what can be interpreted as his stream-of-consciousness narrative. He fights insomnia at the beginning of his story and suffers a total breakdown by the end of the novel, which adds to the atmosphere of an out-of-body experience that his narrative creates. Therefore, the whole world of Palahniuk's novel may be interpreted as a unique Gothic hyperreality that is created by narration.

#### FROM POSTMODERN GOTHIC THEORY TO *FIGHT CLUB*

As stated before, this genre represents a peculiar fusion of the Gothic and the Postmodern traditions. Beville, among other critics, calls it a "literary monster" (Beville, 2009: 16), which seems appropriate, concerning all the monsters its novels have created, and especially concerning Palahniuk's monster, since that one is arguably the scariest of all monsters ever represented – specifically because

it is a part of us. What can be highlighted as perhaps the genre's main trait is the dominance of "unrepresentable aspects of self and reality" (Beville, 2009: 15). In other words, Postmodern Gothic focuses on those sublime, abstract notions that inflict the greatest amount of fear on the audience, since, as Hitchcock would remind us, what scares one the most is what one cannot see. Botting, for example, defines the sublime as a trait that enables "all sorts of imaginative objects and fears situated in or beyond nature [... to] proliferate in a marvellous profusion of the supernatural and the ridiculous, the magical and the nightmarish, the fantastic and the absurd" (Botting, 1996: 3). Beville relies on Jean-Francois Lyotard's theory of the unrepresentable and he argues that it "results in the interruption of subjective action and a split between rationality and imagination" (Beville: 2009: 210). The condition according to Lyotard is one of exultation/terror, or in terms of Kantian philosophy: "pleasure displeasure" (Beville 2009: 24).

In the postmodern world that has been through seemingly all imaginable horrors and catastrophes, there does not seem to be a physically representable thing that can shock the audience anymore. Hence, the focus of the Postmodern Gothic novel is terror rather than horror. Although horror and terror as characteristically Gothic traits are much more complex, the basic distinction between the two can be seen in the fact that horror relies largely on the visual impact that a scene may have on the audience, whereas terror relies on creating an atmosphere of anticipation, of an eerie presence that is not explicit, yet succeeds at shocking the audience. The said shift from horror to terror appears to be influenced heavily by postmodern stress on subjectivity and subjective interpretation of reality and especially on one's inner reaction to the unrepresentable and the ability to be shocked or scared. Writers of Postmodern Gothic thus realized that their novels would have a greater effect on the audience if they are aimed at the reader's inner fears, anxieties, and weaknesses. It is precisely the connection to the audience's personal emotions and mental states that the writers of the Postmodern Gothic novels try to achieve; they aim at one's personal identification with the frightening situations the characters are put through in order to leave the audience terrified. In the following excerpt, Beville discusses the nature of terror:

To be terrified is to be in a state of hesitation or suspension. Terror merely hints at unimaginable horrors and the mind is left to wander, while it waits to uncover what will happen next. Terror can be seen then as an experience that affects an altered state of consciousness, one in which a narrowed focus allows us to absorb fundamental aspects of our being; those which arguably are unknowable in our ordinary subjective frames of reference. (Beville, 2009: 24)

According to Beville, such experience of terror has "abilities to promote the 'unimaginable'" and she relies on Baudrillard's statement that "we all 'crave' terror as a route to elusive truth and validation of self and of the world" (Beville,

2009: 30). She further discusses the possible causes of the popularity of what she names the “terror novels”, and points out the nature of contemporary society which is extremely and overtly aggressive as one of them (Beville, 2009: 23).

In order to evoke such terror in the audience, it seems that Postmodern Gothic writers must focus on the subjectivity of their protagonists as well. Many critics, such as Beville or Levinas, believe that such subjectivity results in “a divided self, a sort of Gothic *doppelgänger*” (Beville, 2009: 29). Although the *doppelgänger* motif has been present in literature for centuries, since its beginnings to this day, it is with the rise of Postmodernism that such a double is most often set within one’s own mind. It is not, however, an exclusive trait of Postmodernism; the *doppelgänger* that is the result of the protagonist’s personality split is seen in some earlier literary works such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, to name but a few. In Postmodern Gothic, much like in some previous cases, the *doppelgänger* takes upon the role of a monster, only this time the monster lives within the protagonist, making him the very monster he is scared of. This suggests that monsters are an inherent and almost inseparable part of human nature; in Baudrillard’s words, “terroristic imagination dwells in all of us” (Baudrillard, 2002: 5). Such a *doppelgänger*, in the case of the novel that is the subject of this paper – Tyler, at first represents everything the Gothic hero is not, but secretly desires to be. Furthermore, he represents all of these desires driven to the extreme, which is in accordance with the Gothic tradition of excess, or the tendency of Gothic literature to surpass all social and moral conventions by introducing “objects and practices that are constructed as negative, irrational, immoral and fantastic” (Botting, 1996: 1). In Gothic tradition, excess is quite often followed by the appearance of a *doppelgänger*, as seen from the following excerpt, where Beville quotes Mulvey and Roberts’ (Mulvey & Roberts, 1998) definition of a typical *doppelgänger*.

Excess is a fundamental element in Gothic writing on all levels, and [in this novel] it is most obviously manifest in the form of the *doppelgänger*. *Doppelgänger* in Gothic fiction has been defined as: ‘the presence of a second self, or alter ego, an archetype of otherness and narcissistic specularly indissolubly linked to the individual’. (Beville, 2009: 134)

The *doppelgänger* motif is extremely important particularly for another markedly postmodern characteristic, and that is fragmentation. As an example of a divided and thus fragmented self *par excellence*, the *doppelgänger* can be seen as a strategy used in depicting and deconstructing “binaries such as the fictional and the real, the soul and the body, the natural and the supernatural” (Beville, 2009: 64). Inevitably, when depicting the double that lives within one’s protagonist, a writer chooses to focus on the world within, rather than without the mind of his protagonist. Such is the case with Palahniuk’s novel, where we see the world through the narrator’s perspective (although it should be mentioned

that Tyler at times takes over the narration, but since he is technically a part of the narrator's vivid personality and imagination, one can still claim that this is an example of subjectively represented narrative). However, given his insomnia, his mental state, and disorder, this subjectivity of narration opens another important aspect of this novel and the Postmodern Gothic writings in general, and that is the opposition between the real and the non-real, or in other words, Baudrillard's simulacra and hyperreality. Costantini mentions that a "postmodern assumption [that] 'reality' is no coherent entity relies on the idea of an equally fragmented identity" (Costantini, 2002: 14), and is supported by various other critics' statements, such as the following:

[L]oss of self has proven to be a central Gothic postmodernist theme, manifested in dramas of possession and the fragmentation of identity in the form of the *doppelgänger*. In many Gothic-postmodernist texts, this fear is often intensified to the point of non-identity in the context of hyperreality and 'multiculturalism'. In this sense, Gothic postmodernism takes from both the Gothic, and postmodernism, the central idea of multiple perspectives on levels of reality. (Beville, 2009: 201)

Perhaps one of the key theoretical frameworks in Postmodernism, especially in the contemporary era, is Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and hyperreality. In its essence, it advocates the existence of more than one version of truth (as opposed to the previously accepted universality of the Truth) and reality and exposes those as utterly constructed entities. His hyperreality (or rather hyperrealities) is completely independent of what would be defined as the objective, or original reality. Palahniuk's *Fight Club* is perhaps one of the best examples of Baudrillard's hyperreality since it appears to be greatly inspired by it. The narrator often repeats that everything is "a copy of a copy of a copy" throughout the novel, which echoes Baudrillard's definition of a simulacrum as a copy that lost its original. Furthermore, he is in some kind of an in-between state resembling more a simulation of reality than actual reality, since he appears to be in delirium, torn between his insomnia and dull, monotonous existence. He contemplates on his consumerist life, one that is the main focus of Baudrillard's theory, his IKEA furniture, and other household belongings, most of which he does not really need, but still buys. Moreover, in the movie, the nameless narrator and Tyler even overtly define themselves as consumers, thus making themselves members of Baudrillard's focus group.

I tell the detective, no, I did not leave the gas on and then leave town. 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 cabinet were me. The plants were me. The television was me. It was me that blew up. Couldn't he see that? (Palahniuk, 1996: 69)

Such a perfect consumerist, however, will undergo a change of character, triggered by his mental split, and later on, he will admit that he was indeed unhappy with his life. He was not happy living the so-called tiny life on his business travels – the simulacrum of life lived on planes and in different hotels. “The magic of travel. Tiny life. Tiny soaps. The tiny airline seats” (Palahniuk, 1996: 103). Eventually, he confesses, “I wanted a way out of my tiny life” (Palahniuk, 1996: 115), which is what has originally triggered Tyler’s birth within his psyche. Palahniuk depicts this hectic lifestyle by using quite a fragmented narrative stream, as seen from the following passage:

You wake up at Krissy Field.

The charm of traveling is everywhere I go, tiny life. I go to the hotel, tiny soap, tiny shampoos, single-serving butter, tiny mouthwash and a single-use toothbrush. Fold into the standard airplane seat. You’re a giant. The problem is your shoulders are too big. Your Alice in Wonderland legs are all of a sudden miles so long they touch the feet of the person in front.

Dinner arrives, a miniature do-it-yourself Chicken Cordon Bleu hobby kit, sort of a put-it-together project to keep you busy.

The pilot has turned on the seatbelt sign, and we would ask you to refrain from moving about the cabin.

You wake up at Meigs Field. (Palahniuk, 1996: 13)

When one also considers the narrator’s extremely uninteresting job of a “formula applier”, a recall campaign coordinator, it becomes quite clear that the protagonist of *Fight Club* does not indeed live, he rather simulates life. His narration is constantly interrupted with sentences which he uses to inform the reader that he is at a different airport. Seemingly confirming such fragmentation of contemporary life, Botting argues that the so-called postmodern condition brings “the breakdown of modernity’s metanarratives” which “discloses a horror that identity, reality, truth, and meaning are not only effects of narratives but subject to a dispersion and multiplication of meanings, realities and identities that obliterate the possibility of imagining any human order and unity” (Botting, 1996: 102). Under such conditions, the unity of factual, realist reality seems to be no longer possible either in fiction or in life. In addition, one may argue that “the Gothic is grounded on the terrain of hallucination” (Punter & Byron, 2004: 293). In other words, the Gothic fiction seems to be a perfect ground for the postmodern idea of hyperreality (in addition to the already existing tendencies of the Gothic genre towards the supernatural), since it allows the story to be taken to the level that surpasses reality, whether it was a hallucination, a dream, a fantasy or a piece of science fiction. All of this adds to “the blurring of the borders that exist between the real and the fictional [...] an atmosphere of mystery and suspense and a counter-narrative function” (Beville, 2009: 15). Thus, a fictional space which has already been marked with implausibility and supernatural traits

appears to be the perfect setting for a specific hyperreality, such as the one seen in Palahniuk's novel.

#### *FIGHT CLUB AS A POSTMODERN GOTHIC NOVEL*

Concerning the particular Gothic characteristics and their postmodern incarnations, Palahniuk's *Fight Club* contains plenty of these elements, mainly reinterpreted and reinvented in comparison to the tradition, in order to create what seems to be the only (or at least one of the few) possible Gothic setting for the postmodern era – that of the hyperreal Gothic. Some of the traditional Gothic elements that are represented in this novel in accordance with the Postmodern Gothic fashion are the setting, the Gothic hero and the doppelganger, the Gothic heroine, the mood, horror and terror, as well as some other minor ones.

#### THE HOUSE AT THE END OF THE STREET

As possibly the most striking Gothic element one may certainly distinguish the setting. According to the Gothic tradition, the setting was usually a castle, abandoned or inhabited, but ruined and decaying. Usually, the castle was surrounded by nature, frequently wild and hostile (resembling the one from Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*) which had the task "to generate the castle as a necessary accompaniment to terror" (Punter & Byron, 2004: 259). The castle often had long halls built in such a manner to resemble a labyrinth, and a dark subterranean area where a dungeon was hidden (perhaps the best example of such is Angela Carter's "Bloody Chamber").

However, within Postmodern Gothic one does not encounter any kind of castle. Such medieval buildings are no longer part of the contemporary society, and the best possible replacement that is suggested is a haunted house. In *Fight Club*, the haunted house that is the locus of the plot is on Paper Street, in the lonely, "toxic waste part of town" (Palahniuk, 1996: 37). It vaguely resembles a castle and it is decaying too, with stairs that crumble, walls that are as if made of paper and a leaking roof so that when it rains the inhabitants have to shut the electricity down. The full vividness of this ruined house is perhaps better represented in the movie than in the book. Its walls are massive and there is no nature around it, as opposed to the traditional Gothic setting; it stands lonely among the waste, with no living soul ever coming in contact with the members of the household.

Furthermore, the story of the novel is set in a town, which is another important aspect of Postmodern Gothic. The setting does no longer resemble the romantic tradition. The postmodern setting is urban, but it is to some extent more frightening than the traditional one. Truly gruesome things are happening in the middle of what was originally imagined to be a safe place, ordered and protected; in other words, the setting that was created in order to bring people together, not only breaks them apart and causes alienation – it invokes the worst things and inspires them to terrible, perhaps even fascist crimes. Cavallaro discusses the urban Gothic setting in the following excerpt:

In contemporary representations of the city as a space of darkness, the sense of isolation associated with conventional Gothic locations often gives way, as Giles Menegaldo (1996:189) points out, to 'a complex framework of buildings and houses and streets' that 'supposes proximity and even promiscuity'. (Cavallaro, 2002: 34)

Moreover, Palahniuk represents the city as a dark place quite literally, because there seems to be no or little light when the important events are occurring. For example, the electricity in the house is too weak, and the narrator and Tyler often have to carry around candles, streetlights are poor, and the fights of the actual Fight Club occur in a basement under one single light pointing to the center. Furthermore, the narrator "meets" Tyler in a bar where it is always only bright enough so that it is not completely dark, and he spends most of his time on planes under dim lighting. Even at his modern condominium, he is too trapped between heavy walls and does not have enough light. All of these are highly symbolic moments in the novel since the narrator seems to live freely only in the dark – when Tyler takes over his body or when he is fighting at Fight Club.

On a more metaphorical level, the setting for Postmodern Gothic can also be the human body. Tyler literally occupies the narrator's body when he takes over to do his shifts at night, every time the narrator's consciousness falls asleep. Furthermore, Palahniuk seems to parody the traditional element of the dark labyrinth and dungeon in his novel. It is needless to mention that the narrator's body is a trap to him and a peculiar dungeon with Tyler becoming his tormentor as the novel progresses. In addition to that, there is the example of Chloe, the woman suffering from terminal disease, whose death the narrator imagines as an escape through the halls of her own body.

Picture Chloe's popular skeleton the size of an insect, running through the vaults and galleries of her innards at two in the morning. Her pulse a siren overhead, announcing: Prepare for death in ten, in nine, in eight seconds. Death will commence in seven, six...

At night, Chloe ran around the maze of her own collapsing veins and burst tubes spraying hot lymph. Nerves surface as trip wires in the tissue.[...]

Chloe climbs hand-over-hand up the curdled lining of her own throat. Death to commence in three, in two. (Palahniuk, 1996: 18-19)

Concerning Chloe, there is yet another possible Gothic setting that she introduces – the caves with the characters' power animals (sadly and hilariously, the narrator's is a penguin – never to fly, never to be completely free), that are accessed through meditation, which introduces one of the significant Postmodern Gothic settings, if not the most significant of them all – one's own mind. Within the narrator's mind, he and Tyler share the residence, fighting for dominance. A great deal of what happens takes place solely within the narrator's mind, such being the



case with Chloe's insect episode. In a more loose interpretation, it can be debated whether all the events from the book took place in the objective reality or solely within his mind.

According to Cavallaro, a more general setting for these works can be the darkness and its various embodiments. He states that "[b]eside the hardware of places and times of darkness, one has to take into account the software of dark psyches: Gothic mentalities tinged with neurotic, psychotic and paranoid proclivities" (Cavallaro, 2002: 21). Furthermore, in relation to what he defines as dark psyches, he introduces the notion of a shadow and states the following:

In psychoanalytical terms, darkness is related to the realm of the *shadow*: the receptacle of all things dreaded and disowned by consciousness [...] What is most menacing about the shadow is that it has an autonomous energy that tends to express itself through terrifying and monstrous forms. Paradoxically, the more intensely the shadow is repressed, the more powerful and energetic it becomes. (Cavallaro, 2002: 24)

From such definition of what Cavallaro considers to be a shadow, it could easily be identified as the unconscious – in particular, the wicked, dark and evil part of the unconscious, which can be classified as yet another setting, although within the scope of the aforementioned mind. Hogle's statement supports such claims, focusing on "themes haunted by a second "unconscious" of deep-seated social and historical dilemmas [...] that become more fearsome the more characters and readers attempt to cover them up or reconcile them symbolically without resolving them fundamentally" (Hogle, 2002: 3). It is perhaps only in the manner of Postmodernism for a setting to take place within the very hero, and the most intimate part of him indeed, as is the case with the narrator and his mind in *Fight Club*.

#### THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES

As opposed to the previous tradition of the Gothic novel, the Gothic hero is no longer of wealthy origin, and there is no curse or doom from the past cast upon him. In *Fight Club*, the narrator who serves as the Gothic hero is ordinary and even nameless, which hints at his lack of identity. Both Palahniuk and Fincher stated that he is a postmodern Everyman, and in the movie, Edward Norton portrayed him as a non-striking, unimpressive man. There is no greater passion or cause governing his actions; the narrator is rather dull and disillusioned, deeply dissatisfied with his life, quite unlike, for example, the Byronic hero or Gothic heroes such as Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights*. Furthermore, not only is he rather ordinary, but he is shifted from the position of a centric hero by means of psychological fragmentation. Botting identifies this psychological estrangement as one of the key elements of Postmodern Gothic, especially when discussing the Gothic hero. He states:

The loss of human identity and the alienation of self from both itself and the social bearings in which a sense of reality is secured are presented in the threatening shapes of increasingly dehumanized environments, machinic doubles and violent, psychotic fragmentation. (Botting, 1996: 102)

As Nazare points out, the protagonist is completely disoriented in his life, not only because of his mental state, but because of his lifestyle as well. He travels a lot and leads his life in a state of perpetual jet-lag, which further adds to the construction of his hyperreality. His existence, Nazare further notes, is both surreal and hyperreal, but never real; he is never present in the actual moment (Nazare, 2010). His insomnia further blurs the borders between the real and the non-real, highlighting the fragmentation of his life and mind, and presenting us with a Gothic hero who is everything but a hero. He is powerless in his life, and even in his body – it is Tyler who has a stronger and more striking presence; it is Tyler who controls their life. In a way, although the doppelganger has been considered to be the Other in literary tradition, in *Fight Club* it is the hero, the narrator that is the Other, with Tyler seemingly being his id, and undoubtedly more powerful a character. Furthermore, such doubling of personality is not the only doubling in the narrator's life. Gamache argues that he leads a “double life” apart from the one he lives as Tyler – his life “splits between who he is in the “real world” and who he is in *Fight Club*” (Gamache, 2011: 39). He even openly states: “Who I am in *Fight Club* is not someone my boss knows” (Palahniuk, 1996: 28).

Perhaps more important than the Gothic hero is the character of Tyler Durden – his double. Following the tradition of Stevenson's famous novel, Tyler Durden is to the narrator of this novel what Mr. Hyde is to Dr. Jekyll, at least to some extent. Whereas Dr. Jekyll has to drink a serum in order to create or, more precisely, trigger Mr. Hyde, the narrator sets Tyler into life without even being aware of it. In Postmodern Gothic writings, there is “a certain attention to the divisions and doublings of the self” (Punter & Byron, 2004: 51). Even though the general literary tradition is rich with examples of the double, or the doppelganger (among many others, Dostoyevsky's *The Double*, Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, Nabokov's *Despair* and the like), in *Fight Club*, the double is not a separate entity, a different human being, as it has mostly been earlier in literature – Tyler inhabits the same body and the same mind as the narrator. Tyler himself explains the complicated situation at one point near the ending of the novel by saying: “We're not two separate men. Long story short, when you're awake, you have the control, and you can call yourself anything you want, but the second you fall asleep, I take over, and you become Tyler Durden” (Palahniuk, 1996: 111).

Beville argues that “[a]s a form of bi-location a *doppelganger* presents itself as a spectral double or an abjection which functions as an alter-ego or twin for a character” (Beville, 2009: 184). Furthermore, she points out the “[g]othic approach to the *doppelganger*, in which a split occurs in the identity of the subject whereby one half is good and the other evil” (Beville, 2009: 152). Dryden supports

this argument by saying that the “double is a threat to the integrity of the self, and frequently [...] brings with it death and destruction [...] and] paradigms of good and evil” (Dryden, 2003: 38). Moreover, Gamache notes that “[p]rior to the Romantic period, the appearance of a *doppelgänger* was almost always seen as an evil portent, often foretelling disaster and the death of the protagonist” (Gamache, 2011: 2). However, Palahniuk’s novel is a tad more complicated than that.

When Tyler Durden is introduced, he is not represented as a villain. Rather than that, he is everything the narrator aspires to be. He is free and uninhibited, independent of social norms and consumerist burdens. In the novel, the narrator states:

I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world. Tyler is capable and free, and I am not. (Palahniuk 116)

In the movie version of *Fight Club*, Tyler is the one who boasts about their difference highlighting the statement of his superiority by saying, “I look like you want to look, I fuck like you want to fuck, I am smart, capable, and most importantly, I am free in all the ways that you are not.” It is obvious that Tyler here acts as a better self, or as Iocco argues, the alter ego. As she puts it, he is both the narrator’s “alter ego and doppelgänger” (Iocco, 2007: 54). She further quotes Botting to support her claims by stating that “unlike the doppelgänger, [alter ego] is a better self, an external image of good conscience” (Iocco, 2007: 54). However, by the time the Project Mayhem is in full swing and the narrator realizes that he is, in fact, Tyler Durden, Tyler takes on the role of the evil double and becomes some kind of a Postmodern Gothic monster. Precisely monsters seem to be another important element of the Postmodern Gothic, as seen from the following Beville’s statement:

Similarly, the postmodernist and Gothic fascination with monsters and grotesques overlap in Gothic-postmodernism. Monsters, as projections of abject otherness, are subsequently deemed as no longer a marginal, but as an intrinsic part of the literary narrative of our postmodern culture. (Beville, 2009: 201)

Punter and Byron rely on etymology when they define a monster as something “to be shown, something that serves to demonstrate (Latin, *monstrare*: to demonstrate) and to warn (Latin, *monere*: to warn)” (Punter & Byron, 2004: 263). Concerning this particular novel, Tyler Durden’s function is to highlight the narrator’s repressed desires and urges, since “monsters, [are] the displaced embodiment of tendencies that are repressed” (Punter & Byron, 2004: 264). As Cavallaro argues, “the psyche often exhibits its darkest traits when its hidden

drives do not find an outlet in action" (Cavallaro, 2002: 52). Such is the case with the nameless narrator who invents Tyler with the sole purpose of creating an outlet for his suppressed frustrations.

However, as opposed to the tradition of the Gothic monster, of which perhaps the best example is Shelley's *Frankenstein*, "modern monsters are no longer visible to the naked eye" (Weinstock, 2014: 45). Furthermore, the monster is no longer a separate physical entity, an outside threat – monsters are inside us, and they usually hint at "psychological dislocation and turmoil" (Cavallaro, 2002: 48). On the other hand, just like Victor Frankenstein's monster represents his suppressed desire and executes his hidden wishes, Tyler Durden is triggered by the narrator's urges and desires as well, he acts upon his sexual attraction to Marla, destroys his condominium and his trivial belongings and kills his boss, the person he hates.

It's my desk.

I know my boss is dead.

The three ways to make napalm. I knew Tyler was going to kill my boss. The second I smelled gasoline on my hands, when I said I wanted out of my job, I was giving him permission. Be my guest.

Kill my boss.

Oh, Tyler. I know a computer blew up.

I know this because Tyler knows this (Palahniuk, 1996: 123–124).

Therefore, it can be argued that Tyler is, in fact, the narrator's id. Cavallaro describes this by saying that "[t]he conceptual conflicts personified by the hero-villain parallel the tension between the ego and the id – conscious reason and unconscious fantasies and desires – as theorized by Freudian psychoanalysis" (Cavallaro, 2002: 49). This mentioning of Freud inevitably raises the question of sexuality, and it can be concluded that sexual urges and desires are what initially brings Tyler to life. However, it can be said that even though Marla seems to be the main trigger for Tyler's creation, the narrator's dissatisfaction with his life and job is what also adds to the creation of his monster; the insomnia that appeared long before Marla first started intruding his support groups is a hint that supports this claim. Moreover, what is the worst part of his pitiful life is his utter alienation, as it appears to be his biggest problem (and the biggest issue of the postmodern Everyman); this is reflected in the fact that after interacting with people in the support groups, his insomnia condition starts showing signs of recovery. It can be thus concluded that it is "alienation [that] prompts his "proleptic imagination" to give birth to an alter ego, the angry white male intent on obliterating history" (Tuss, 2004: 96). Furthermore, what is even more important for this relationship is the fact that Tyler as the double, the doppelganger will "always 'overflow' and remain unattainable and uncontrollable" (Beville, 2009: 29).

As Gamache states, "[w]hat makes the relationship between the Narrator and Tyler more complicated than the similar coexistence of Jekyll and Hyde is that

the Narrator *never* has control of Tyler. It is as if Tyler is a completely autonomous figure who just happens to share the Narrator's body" (Gamache, 2011: 9). This is highlighted by the narrative, since "there are no grammatical indications as to whether it is the Narrator or Tyler speaking, making their discourse appear like one single stream of consciousness" (Gamache, 2011: 37). In this light, Tyler and the narrator can also be representatives of what Lacan would define as the split subject, which only contributes to the confusion of reality in this novel. Fonseca seems to agree with this aspect of the Lacanian theory since he points out that "Tyler Durden, is not only the most aware of the two... but is the version of the self that has a name" (Fonseca, 2007: 196). In other words, he is an accomplished and rounded character in all the ways the narrator is not; Tyler is the ego, he is the only one aware of their unity. Furthermore, to add to the narrator's passive nature, Gamache points out that the narrator confesses that he "sometimes lets Tyler do the talking, not only to protect the secrecy of Fight Club but because he views Tyler as a stronger person than himself" (Gamache, 2011: 40). In the novel, the narrator states: "At the hospital, Tyler tells them I fell down. Sometimes, Tyler speaks for me. I did this to myself" (Palahniuk, 1996: 30). Moreover, Tyler even becomes a god-like figure, an all-containing being, as the narrator says:

This is what Tyler wants me to do.  
 These are Tyler's words coming out of my mouth.  
 I am Tyler's mouth.  
 I am Tyler's hands.  
 Everybody in Project Mayhem is part of Tyler Durden, and vice versa.  
 (Palahniuk, 1996: 102)

Tyler, the doppelganger, the monster, has full control over him, which results in his being petrified to fall asleep since "usurpation occurs whenever he is sleeping, whenever, that is, he leaves his mind vulnerable to his unconscious, from which Tyler emerges" (Gamache, 2011: 41), much like Dr. Jekyll.

The next night, I'd go to bed earlier.  
 That next night, Tyler would be in charge a little longer.  
 Every night that I go to bed earlier and earlier, Tyler will be in charge longer and longer.  
 "But you are Tyler," Marla says.  
 No.  
 No, I'm not. (Palahniuk, 1996: 116)

The doppelganger here is so strong that the narrator fears he might take over. He says: "And if I went to bed earlier every night and I slept later every morning, eventually I'd be gone altogether. I'd just go to sleep and never wake up" (Palahniuk, 1996: 117). The fact that Tyler operates at night, in darkness, only adds

to his characterization of an essentially evil person, even one of fascist nature. Tyler's fascist traits are reflected in his creation of a closed, uniformed group whose members blindly obey one strict pattern of behavior. He even introduces a ritual of marking his followers – he makes a chemical burn in the shape of his kiss on their hands. Furthermore, destructive missions that he imposes upon his followers quickly escalate to extreme violence – he kills the narrator's boss essentially because he belongs to the group of people that Tyler has marked as the enemy. Moreover, even the initials of the terroristic Project Mayhem hint at darkness, at the darkest part of the narrator's mind. What makes Tyler a true force that should be dreaded is the fact that he seems indestructible and that he just refuses to disappear.

So, now that I know about Tyler, will he just disappear?

"No," Tyler says, still holding my hand, "I wouldn't be here in the first place if you didn't want me, I'll still live my life while you're asleep, but if you fuck with me, if you chain yourself to the bed at night or take big doses of sleeping pills, then we'll be enemies. And I'll get you for it."

Oh, this is bullshit. This is a dream, Tyler is a projection. He's a disassociative personality disorder, a psychogenic fugue state, Tyler Durden is my hallucination.

"Fuck that shit," Tyler says, "Maybe you're my schizophrenic hallucination". (Palahniuk, 1996: 111-112)

Eventually, the narrator realizes that the two of them cannot possibly coexist within one mind, and he decides that he has to kill Tyler. This also unravels as if in hyperreality, because the scene is far from realistic and appears to belong more to magic than to the actual reality, as seen from the lines: "Marla's coming toward me, just me because Tyler's gone. Poof. Tyler's my hallucination, not hers. Fast as a magic trick, Tyler's disappeared. And now I'm just one man holding a gun in my mouth" (Palahniuk, 1996: 139). It seems that Tyler fulfills his purpose, however, since the monster succeeds in showing the narrator what life is and how to obtain at least some kind of identity for himself. In other words, with the help of the monster, the narrator takes hold of his own life when he says: "To God, this looks like one man alone, holding a gun in his own mouth, but it's Tyler holding the gun, and it's my life" (Palahniuk, 1996: 138).

#### YOU CANNOT SAVE THE DAMSEL IF SHE LOVES HER DISTRESS

Another Gothic element that is given a new, postmodern appearance in this novel is the Gothic heroine. The postmodern incarnation of the traditional Gothic heroine is strikingly different because now "[t]he strength and self-possession of the heroine [...] distinguishes her from earlier figures, whose faintings and flight signaled the powerlessness of persecuted femininity" (Botting, 1996: 107). Marla Singer is no damsel in distress, although she does appear to be in a serious

distress. However, the hero that is to save her is as lost as she is, and there is, of course, the question whether she wants to be saved. She seems to resemble Bertha from Bronte's *Jane Eyre* to a greater extent rather than the classic Gothic heroine like Matilda in *The Castle of Otranto*. She is no virginal maiden, she is an anti-heroine, and seemingly resembles Tyler more than she resembles the narrator in her freedom of social norms and rules. She also leads a hyperreal life, lost in the medications she takes, but she too seeks human contact, much like the narrator does, which is seen from her interest in support groups that the narrator visits, and her numerous relationships, which are seen from her equally numerous speeches that begin with "I dated a guy once..."

However, since this is an example of a strikingly masculine Postmodern Gothic, Marla is not as vividly portrayed in the book, as in the movie where she is played by Helena Bonham Carter. She is, nevertheless, a great example of the reinvented Gothic heroine. Nearly all traditional traits of the Gothic heroine are parodied in this novel, and some are completely neglected. For example, we know nothing of her origin or her family, although it is evident that she is not of noble origin and does not come from a wealthy family. Perhaps the most thoroughly parodied element of characterization of the Gothic heroine in Marla is her beauty. Marla is attractive to both Tyler and the narrator, but her depictions (and especially the way in which she is represented in the movie) resemble more a deranged circus freak than a beautiful damsel. However, despite all of these, in *Fight Club*, her main function is to trigger the change in the protagonist, and that is an aspect in which Marla is more of a traditional Gothic heroine than a postmodern one – she is to some extent inferior to the Gothic hero, and her *raison d'être* in the novel is to serve as a force that influences the narrator in different manners. Yet, it should be stated that in spite of this, she still is a prominent representative of the feminist Gothic heroine, even though the focus of the story is not on her, especially when near the end of the novel, as opposed to the tradition, she tries to be the one to save the tormented hero.

#### SMELLS LIKE GLOOMY SPIRIT

As far as the mood of the novel is concerned, the Postmodern Gothic mood resembles that of the traditional Gothic genre. The atmosphere is that of gloom and mystery since the audience does not know what is to happen. Palahniuk achieves this by beginning his narrative with the climax, introducing the scene when Tyler and the narrator wait for the Parker-Morris building to explode, with Tyler holding the gun in the narrator's mouth (interestingly enough, by the end of the story, we will see that it is, in fact, the narrator who holds a gun; it becomes evident that he is not the victim that we assumed him to be at the beginning and during the greater part of the novel – he is the threat).

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, all main events take place under the veil of darkness and shadows, adding to both mystery and gloom, but also functioning as a foreshadowing of what is to come. Moreover, it signals the

distinctly postmodern trait of disillusionment and the anarchistic tendencies of the protagonists, since darkness is usually associated with evil. "We are the middle children of history," Tyler says, thus creating an atmosphere of being essentially lost in time and history; that is they do not belong anywhere, and even darkness is not their home. This anarchy that Tyler's group promotes is also a representation of the traditional Gothic notion of order – Palahniuk's protagonists aim at destroying it since they see it as the one to blame for the current state of society, as opposed to the traditional Gothic novel in which the order that is violated must be restored in any possible way.

It can be thus concluded that the Gothic mood per se has not significantly changed in the transition from Romanticism to Postmodernism. It is perhaps the only element that has not been thoroughly modified. Rather than that, it has been enriched with some traits of the postmodern condition, such as disillusionment and alienation, while retaining its characteristic traditional definition.

#### THE POSTMODERN AMERICAN HORROR STORY

Concerning the elements of horror in the novel, there are, as previously mentioned, fewer elements of horror than terror in *Fight Club*. There is the inevitable element of violence; the scenes of male aggression during fights in *Fight Club* are indeed picturesque (in the movie they are more striking, however, than in the novel). Different depictions of the human body, often wounded, with lots of blood are very prominent and they form a significant part of the novel, yet they are not as striking an element as terror is. The truly gruesome things are represented neither in the novel nor in the movie. For example, the murder of the narrator's boss is only mentioned in the novel, whereas in the movie it is not even referred to. Also, the castration scenes in which an actual castration is never executed demonstrate that the role of horror in Postmodern Gothic is to merely invoke terror at the mention of its possibility. In other words, it is the anticipation of truly gruesome things that has a greater impact on the audience rather than the visual representation of such things, and the Postmodern Gothic favors such approach considerably.

As opposed to horror, terror is present in great amounts in the novel. The fact that the novel begins with the climax is what sets the audience in a state of terror from the very beginning. There is a constant presence of fear and expectation that dominate the overall atmosphere of the novel. The previously mentioned unrepresentable is the main element of the postmodern terror. Namely, there is a frequent insistence on silence ("The first rule of *Fight Club* is you don't talk about *Fight Club*. The second rule of *Fight Club* is you don't talk about *Fight Club*."), thus creating an atmosphere of something sinister and terrible happening in the world that the narrator encounters. Even the initials P.M. suggested by the Project Mayhem hint at something dark and horrible which further contributes to the overall atmosphere of terror. Moreover, the "space monkeys" are given various assignments and neither the narrator nor the audience knows anything



about those events until they actually take place. What is more, even after such events occur it is unknown whether those events were the act of Tyler's various committees or just other people's vandalisms.

The threat of inevitable death is also present throughout the novel, mostly due to the opening scene. In addition, there are various support groups for people suffering from terminal diseases that introduce death as an important element of the novel. As a matter of fact, disease is such a prominent topic that even Marla suspects that she might have cancer at one point (also, the narrator often refers to Marla as a "cancer", meaning the disease). The narrator's job is another element closely related to death; he works on the scenes of car accidents. He often openly wishes for his own death and prays for the airplane to crash every time he takes a flight. He also frequently repeats that "[o]n a long enough timeline, everyone's survival rate drops to zero" (Palahniuk, 1996: 118). Moreover, various actual deaths occur in the novel, such as Chloe's, Bob's and that of the narrator's boss. The narrator occasionally glorifies it and refers to it as the "amazing miracle of death" or the state when one can acquire one's own identity; "Only in death will we have our names since only in death are we no longer part of the effort. In death, we become heroes" (Palahniuk, 1996: 119). All of the mentioned facts inflict the feeling of suspense and terror in the audience, which thus becomes the dominant element of the novel and of Postmodern Gothic in general.

#### OTHER POSTMODERN GOTHIC ELEMENTS

There are various minor Gothic elements in *Fight Club* that are given a new, postmodern note, as well. For example, apart from monsters, Palahniuk often introduces some subtle hints at zombies; the narrator physically looks like a zombie with a hole in his cheek and a body greatly violated in numerous fights. Furthermore, the behavior of the "space monkeys" quite resembles the typical portrayal of zombies. They appear to be in a state of trance and show no signs of individuality – they only obey Tyler's orders without emotions or individual thinking. Apart from these, phantoms and ghosts are frequently mentioned, yet in a rather parodic manner, since Marla believes that they actually call her on the phone and then do not speak to her. Moreover, dreams seem to be an important motif in *Fight Club*, as well. It can be said that all of Tyler's actions can be interpreted as one of the narrator's dreams, and even his life resembles a dream more than reality. There is also the inevitable Gothic element of madness that seems to be present to some extent in every character, only to culminate in the narrator's institutionalization, which is yet another element of parody since the narrator refers to the sanatorium as Heaven.

In fact, most of the traditional Gothic elements are parodied, which can be seen as ironic, since parody is also an inseparable part of the Gothic genre. Perhaps the best parody in the novel is that of science. In Shelley's *Frankenstein*, for example, science is treated very seriously and it is used to create a new form of life, whereas in Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* it is used to create a serum

to eliminate evil from people. Yet, in *Fight Club*, science is used to make soap, and also explosive, which is a rather trivial notion in comparison to the role that science had in the traditional Gothic novel. Another traditional element that is parodied is the element of romance. There are no great emotions in this novel, except fear, and the romantic involvement between the narrator and Marla culminates in "I like you" as opposed to the great romances and wild emotions that govern the lives of traditional Gothic heroes and heroines. More importantly, the involvement that the narrator and Marla have is perverse to a great extent, especially after the narrator states: "We have a sort of triangle here. I want Tyler. Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants me. I don't want Marla and Tyler doesn't want me around, not anymore. This isn't about love as in caring. This is about property as in ownership" (Palahniuk, 1996: 3). In relation to emotions, sexuality is also yet another Gothic element that is present in this novel. It is, in accordance with the Gothic tradition, suppressed within the narrator as well, but only until Tyler is born. From that point, it obtains perverse connotation.

Another important Gothic element is the traditional Gothic fascination with the past. However, in Palahniuk's novel, there is a "sense of being disconnected from history and, therefore, [the characters are] in no way responsible for correcting the problems created by earlier generations" (Schultz, 2011: 596). At the beginning of the novel, history is denied altogether and Tyler overtly renounces it. He says that no one asked the contemporary generations about anything, which consequently makes them free of responsibility for fixing the mistakes that resulted from the past generations' poor decisions. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes evident that Tyler is burdened with history after all, as he creates the Project Mayhem in order to destroy the existing order and civilization, and in it – the history that he and the people of his generation have inherited. This echoes Palahniuk's belief that however lost the postmodern civilization is, it is still deeply rooted in the past, and that there is not a single thing that is and could possibly be free of all the roots and ties of its past.

#### CONCLUSION: ALL MONSTERS ARE HUMAN

In Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, all of the main traits of Postmodern Gothic fiction are fairly represented. The story is concerned with the nameless narrator and his psychological split which results in his creating a postmodern monster – Tyler Durden – who is to act upon his repressed desires and urges. Everything from the setting to the protagonists is distinctly postmodern and belongs to the Postmodern Gothic, which is, in essence, a postmodern incarnation of the traditional set of Gothic traits. The novel follows the subjective stream of consciousness of the narrator which introduces different levels of the narrator's hyperreality through the delirium of his life.

In this novel, Palahniuk reinvents the traditional Gothic novel and attempts to set it in a more contemporary environment. The setting and the characters are thus much closer to the audience since they resemble the setting and the characters that

can be met in real life. Precisely because of such familiarity, it seems, the author chooses to introduce terror as the predominant element of his novel in order to achieve the same mood and effect that the traditional Gothic novel had earlier. In order to use such familiarity for the effect of fear and suspense, Palahniuk focuses on subjectivity, which consequently encourages the audience to become more closely engaged with the story and its characters. The main differences from the traditional Gothic novel that Palahniuk introduces are reflected almost in every typical Gothic element. Perhaps the greatest ones are also concerned with making the Gothic genre much closer to the contemporary audience, since the setting is relocated to the urban environment, and the characters belong to the contemporary consumerist society, or even Baudrillardian hyperreality.

It is interesting to mention that perhaps the only element that Palahniuk has adopted from Gothic literary tradition is the element of parody. However, what he has reinvented is the object of parody; namely, Palahniuk uses the traditional element of parody on the rest of the traditional Gothic elements. Every element, from the setting, the Gothic hero and heroine, to the other minor ones, such as supernatural elements or sexuality, has a more or less parodic connotation. It can even be said that the whole novel is a parody on different levels and different notions, yet this does not diminish its Gothic potential and impact that it has had on the audience.

In conclusion, it can be argued that Postmodern Gothic assumes an important role in the contemporary culture, as it appears to be interwoven in literature, cinema, television and contemporary media. Elements of the Gothic genre have always been appealing to different authors and the genre as such has been frequently merged with various other different genres. For Palahniuk, the Gothic genre seems to be an important asset to creating his signature stories and it could be said that, in *Fight Club*, the Gothic elements are what makes the story more appealing to readers. It can be even argued that it is its focus on the terror of the unrepresentable and terror of our inner monsters that makes it so appealing to the contemporary audience, since it is easy to identify with, and finally be shocked and shaken by it. After all, it is the monster inside of us that we all secretly fear the most.

Slađana Stamenković

TAMA U NAMA: POSTMODERNA GOTIKA U ROMANU  
*BORILAČKI KLUB ČAKA PALAHNJUKA*

Postmoderni gotski žanr predstavlja postmodernu inkarnaciju tradicionalnog gotskog žanra i obuhvata tradicionalne gotske elemente, premda u izvesnoj meri izmenjene i nadograđene. U biti, ovaj žanr predstavlja jedinstven spoj gotskog žanra i postmodernih odlika. U radu se razmatraju takvi unapređeni gotski elementi na primeru romana Čaka Palahnjuka *Borilački klub*. Svi glavni gotski elementi (poput vremena i mesta zbivanja, gotskih junaka i junakinje, dvojnika itd.) predstavljeni su u ovom romanu sa posebnim naglaskom na subjektivnosti i elementu terora, jer su oni možda dve tačke najvećeg pomaka u odnosu na tradicionalne karakteristike gotskog žanra. Osim gotske teorije i teorije postmodernizma, još jedan teorijski okvir se doima vrlo bitnim za interpretaciju ovog romana, a to je Bodrijarova teorija hiperrealnosti. Tradicionalna gotska priča izmeštena je tako da pripada nivou realnosti koji je upečatljivo očuđen od stvarnosti koja je činjenica. Uz ovakav jedinstven spoj različitih, premda čini se srodnih, teorijskih okvira, Palahnjukov roman jeste jedan od najboljih predstavnika postmodernog gotskog žanra.

Ključne reči: postmoderna gotika, gotski elementi, hiperrealnost, *Borilački klub*

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