

**EXISTENTIAL THOUGHT
IN *AMERICAN PSYCHO*
AND *FIGHT CLUB***

by

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Abstract

Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) demonstrate a strong basis in existential thought. Both novels reference the philosophical and literary works of Sartre and Camus—two French intellectuals associated with the mid-twentieth-century movement existentialism—as well as existentialism's nineteenth-century antecedents Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche. More importantly, *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* also modify the philosophy and its expression, incorporating postmodern satire, graphically violent content, and the Gothic conventions of “the double” and “the unspeakable”, in order to update existential thought to suit the contemporary milieu in which these texts were produced.

This new expression of existential thought is interlaced with the social critique *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* advance, particularly their satirical accounts of the vacuous banality of modern consumer culture and their disturbing representations of the repression and violent excesses ensuing from the crisis of masculinity. The engagement with existentialism in these novels also serves a playful function, as Ellis and Palahniuk frequently subvert the philosophy, keeping its idealism secondary to their experiments with its implications within the realm of fiction, emphasising the symptoms of existential crisis, rather than the resolution of the ontological quest for meaning. While these two novels can be considered existential in relation to the tradition of classic existentialist texts, they also represent a distinctive development of existential fiction—one that explores the existential condition of the postmodern subject at the end of the twentieth century.

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“...in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger...”

~ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Introduction

Thought that is broadly considered existential can be found throughout literary history. Notable works which have been analysed as existential fiction range from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (c.430 B.C.), to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600), to Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864), to Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) (Brosman 10-11, 212-16). Yet, while its fundamental concerns may be universal—comprising reflections on the human condition that transcend time and place, existential thought is primarily associated with the French philosophical movement, existentialism, which, catalysed by intellectuals working within a specific historical context, came to prominence in the mid-twentieth century. As Catherine Brosman notes in the introduction to her study *Existential Fiction* (2000), tensions—between philosophy and literature, national and international localities, the historic and the timeless, as well as the variety of existential thought in general—complicate “any attempt to define and understand existential fiction” (1).

American Psycho (1991) by Bret Easton Ellis and *Fight Club* (1996) by Chuck Palahniuk, two novels written by American authors near the end of the twentieth century, both demonstrate a strong basis in existential thought and frequently reference the philosophical and literary works of the mid-century existentialists and their nineteenth-century antecedents. *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* also modify the philosophy and its expression, introducing postmodern satire, graphically violent content, and elements of the Gothic tradition, in order to adapt existential thought to suit the historical and artistic milieu in which these texts were produced. These two novels can therefore be considered existential in relation to the tradition of classic existential texts, as well as representing a distinctive development of existential fiction in their own right.

American Psycho and *Fight Club* derive from a similar concern, which questions how the individual can lead a meaningful existence within a societal milieu that seems to deny the

possibility of any kind of transcendence. In both novels biting social satire critiques the dehumanising effects of rampant postwar commercialism and consumerism. Both depict the vacuous lives of young adults who are financially and socially comfortable, or even privileged, yet find themselves spiritually and emotionally impoverished. Within a milieu characterised by apathy, banality, and indifference, disenfranchised characters search for authentic feeling. In an article on the loss of authentic experience in Palahniuk's fiction, Andrew Ng writes: "In *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, the pointlessness of experience renders the subjects adrift in a capitalist sea of floating signifiers, where humans have only equal worth to, or even lesser than, things" (*Reading Chuck Palahniuk* 25). Both authors graphically engage with content typically deemed "taboo" or "transgressive" in literature, such as unmediated moral depravity and the depiction of explicit outbursts of violence as their protagonists investigate the last remnants of their fragmented human identities.

In the introduction to their book *Shopping in Space*, Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney use the term "Blank Generation" to describe a group of writers, including Ellis, "who wrote flat affectless prose which dealt with all aspects of contemporary urban life: crime, drugs, sexual excess, media overload, consumer madness, inner-city decay and fashion-crazed nightlife" (ii). Other critics have included Palahniuk as one of these "Blank Generation" or "Generation X" writers (Gö 49; Kuhn and Rubin, *Reading Chuck Palahniuk* 3-4).¹ Both Ellis and Palahniuk share a similarly economical style derived from modern minimalists like Hemingway (Kuhn and Rubin 4), whom both authors have cited as a key influence (Sartain 6; Clarke 70).² Both authors frequently incorporate "found" material into their texts, such as advertising, pornography, billboards, posters, song lyrics, as well as numerous pop culture references in general. Both authors have created narrators

¹ "Palahniuk's themes and methods can be viewed within the parameters of contemporary literature, invoking 'the social ethos of late capitalism, like cyber-punk sci-fi and the so-called "brat pack" writers like Tama Janowitz, Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney'" (Kuhn and Rubin, *Reading Chuck Palahniuk* 3-4)

² Hemingway's work has also been the subject of academic criticism as existential fiction. For example, see Brosman (211-16) and John Killinger's *Hemingway and the Dead Gods: A Study in Existentialism* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1960).

with a penchant for list-making or reciting facts, such as the recipes for homemade explosives and rendering soap in *Fight Club*, or Patrick Bateman's obsessive monologues on the latest electronic devices, trendy clothing, and pop music in *American Psycho*. Both authors use black humour and satire as a vehicle for their critiques of American society and the loss of authentic meaning in the postmodern world.

Both novels came under criticism for their graphic content. In the case of *American Psycho* the novel was originally to be published by Simon & Schuster, who had enjoyed the success of Ellis' meteoric rise to fame, having published his first two novels: *Less Than Zero* (1985) and *The Rules of Attraction* (1987). The publishing house cancelled *American Psycho* because of concerns regarding its content, however, breaching their contract and forfeiting the \$300,000 advance they had paid Ellis for the book. Excerpts from the most shocking parts of the novel were in circulation within the house staff at Simon & Schuster before the book was published, and these excerpts, when leaked to the press, created a hysterical fervour in the media with attacks on the novel's supposedly voyeuristic misogyny and incendiary violent agenda (Murphet 65-71). Ellis, in an interview published in 1999, expressed his surprise that "no one, at least in America, came to any kind of wholehearted defence of the book" (Clarke 80), perhaps alluding to the sympathetic treatment the book received from Elizabeth Young writing in the U.K.

Palahniuk gained popular attention with David Fincher's cinematic adaptation of *Fight Club* in 1999, and thus it is difficult to clearly distinguish the reception of the book from the film. The film certainly polarised critics, receiving passionate praise for its humour and satire, as well as avid denouncement. *Fight Club* criticism frequently revolves around the question of whether or not its charismatic anti-hero, Tyler Durden, is an appropriate role-model (Mathews 82). Hence, at one extreme, film critic Alexander Walker accused Fincher's adaption of being "a threatening revival of Nazism" that "uncritically enshrines

principles that once underpinned the politics of fascism” (qtd. in Bennett 66), and in a similar vein Henry Giroux has described the film as

morally bankrupt and politically reactionary [...] Representations of violence, masculinity, and gender in the film seem to mirror the pathology of individual and institutional violence that informs the American landscape, extending from all manner of hate crimes to the far Right’s celebration of paramilitary and proto-fascist subcultures. (17)

In his assessment of *Fight Club*’s reception, Jesse Kavadlo suggests that the sentiments articulated in the aforementioned quotations are understandable when one considers that the text “dares its readers to take Tyler—and his reactionary politics—at face value”, while noting the “unsettling” trend that amongst the book and film’s “popular readership” many fans have done just that (11).

When we consider the critical receptions of both *Fight Club* and *American Psycho*, it is noteworthy that both books were misread and criticised for embodying aspects of society that the authors arguably set out to undermine. For, as Kavadlo observes, if “*Fight Club* embodies Giroux’s ‘protofacism,’ it is in order to condemn it” (13), or, as Young writes of *American Psycho*, a “book which no one seemed to bother to read in any detail”:

Bret Easton Ellis spent three years writing this novel, and it *is* a novel—not a “How-to-manual”, nor true-crime, not a manifesto or a tract—and it seems reasonable to give it more than three minutes consideration. (“Beast” 85, 93)

Just as Kavadlo suggests that beneath Tyler Durden’s political sophistry Palahniuk is making a “call to recognise that fascism is the endgame of a capitalist system that would reduce workers to drones and all personal identification to brand names and commercial transactions” (13), so too does Young point out that Patrick Bateman “functions as a rhetorical device, the Devil’s Advocate whose consumer manifesto merely highlights what Ellis has referred to as the ‘spiritual’ malaise and ugliness of the eighties” (“Beast” 120).

For both texts, then, there lies a danger in ignoring, as several critics have, the division between the views the characters express as first person narration and an implied narrative critique. There is also the danger of reacting to such misreading by compensating with a reductive counter reading of one's own, for it is clear that these texts are more complex than straightforward satires.

It is interesting to consider the brief references Palahniuk and Ellis have made to each other in interviews. In a 2005 interview with Matt Kavanagh, Palahniuk describes both *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* as “‘transgressional’ fiction [...] where characters act out in order to gain a sense of personal power” (179). Later in the interview, Kavanagh remarks:

Fight Club reminds me of Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*. Certainly, both novels share a fascination with violence, dark humour, and adversarial relation to consumer culture. (187)

He goes on to mention the controversial receptions of both books, and notes the significant difference in that most readers arrive at *Fight Club* through Fincher’s film. Palahniuk agrees with the idea of Fincher as “matchmaker” between author and reader, before commenting:

Ellis was already famous when his book *American Psycho* debuted, and it dealt with non-consensual violence, where villains victimized others. The most important aspect of *Fight Club* was the consensual nature of the violence. [...] It was a very old-fashioned, socially responsible novel. All the social contracts were fulfilled. (187-88)

This seems a strange way for Palahniuk to distance his book from Ellis’ (in terms of their shared “fascination with violence”) considering he previously acknowledges their similarities as transgressive fiction. Firstly, he ignores the numerous occasions in *Fight Club*

where the violence is not consensual,³ and secondly, by describing his book as “very old-fashioned [and] socially responsible”, he is, in a way, implying that Ellis’ is not because it depicts “villains victimiz[ing] others.” Granted, an interview is perhaps not the place to expect comprehensive analysis, but Palahniuk’s response here smacks of misreading and defensiveness.

Interestingly, Ellis behaves similarly in a 2005 interview with Dave Weich. When Weich suggests to Ellis that he deliberately seeks risqué subjects, Ellis responds:

But that suggests a calculation on getting a response, and that’s not generally why I’m writing a book. If I wanted to do that I would go into even more hardcore areas. I don’t think I’m anywhere near the stuff Chuck Palahniuk writes, for instance. He writes some of the most upsetting things I’ve ever come across, and yet he’s not nearly as reviled.

Here Ellis implies Palahniuk’s writing “calculat[es] on getting a response”, such as the infamous opening chapter of *Haunted* (2005) which Ellis has described in an interview with Peter Murphy as “the most horrible thing I’ve ever read”.⁴ However, in that same interview he also praises *Fight Club* as not “so much a horror book as a commentary on masculinity and being male”, and in an advertisement for *Fight Club* in Palahniuk’s second novel *Survivor* (1999), Ellis is quoted as saying that: “*Fight Club* achieves something only terrifying books do—it tells us: this is how we live now. Maybe our generation has found its Don DeLillo”. This is praise indeed from someone who has “always read Don DeLillo” (Clarke 71), but the qualifier here is significant: *maybe*. Furthermore, it is impossible not to read Ellis’ comment on “terrifying books” without thinking of *his* book *American Psycho*, perhaps *the* most terrifying book in contemporary literature. In a way then, Ellis subtly

³ Examples include: the self-harm the narrator inflicts on himself because of Tyler Durden; the narrator’s terrorisation of Raymond in chapter 20; Bob’s death at the hands of the police in chapter 24; the murder of the narrator’s boss in chapter 26; in chapter 27 it appears that Tyler has hit Marla and given her a “black eye” (194), and that he has also murdered Patrick Madden, “the mayor’s special envoy on recycling” (196).

⁴ This is perhaps not an unreasonable thing to say at all, considering Palahniuk himself boasts that forty people have fainted during his public readings of the story (Glaister).

asserts *American Psycho*'s status as precursor to *Fight Club*, as parent-text. From these comments by both authors we can discern a respect for the other's work and perhaps an acknowledgement of similarity, but there is also an attempt at distancing, a tone which borders on defensive criticism without becoming too explicit. Perhaps these comments demonstrate not so much Harold Bloom's theory of the "anxiety of influence" as the anxiety of contagion by perceived similarity,⁵ in that Ellis and Palahniuk discern, on some level, that *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* have more in common than they wish to acknowledge.

This thesis explores one particularly significant similarity between *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*: the treatment of existential thought, a subject that literary criticism has already discussed, to varying degrees, in relation to the works of Ellis and Palahniuk. Ellis' first novel, *Less Than Zero*, is examined as an existential text by Nicki Sahlin in her article "But This Road Doesn't Go Anywhere': The Existential Dilemma in *Less Than Zero*". Sahlin suggests that Los Angeles has long served as an apt setting for stories of deception and "disillusionment", of "corruption lurking" beneath glamour, evoking the "absurdist tradition" (23). Hence Sahlin sees *Less Than Zero* as a descendent of Joan Didion's tale of Hollywood hedonism, *Play It As It Lays* (1970), which has itself been treated as an existential text.⁶ Sahlin describes *Less Than Zero* as "consistently existential in its outlook", containing a "mixture of [elements of existentialism] stemming from Camus and Sartre" (25). She traces the common existential themes of alienation, the void or nothingness, a preoccupation with death, the burden of responsibility, and the absurd throughout the novel, and ultimately concludes that by its end, Clay, the novel's young narrator,

has become aware of his own anxiety and alienation, as well as the meaninglessness around him; and though he has found no solution, he has found the courage to

⁵ See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973).

⁶ Geherin, David J. "Nothingness and Beyond: Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*." *Critique* 16 (1974): 64-78.

continue to live. In having faced the absurd as he finds it, Clay takes on the proportions of an existential hero. (41)

It may be exaggerating the implications of Clay's supposed "epiphany" to call him a "hero" (40, 41), but whether or not the outcome is as positive as she suggests, Sahlin's analysis of Clay's deepening sense of existential crisis is accurate.

American Psycho has not previously been fully considered in terms of its basis in existential thought. Alex Blazer's article "*American Psycho, Hamlet, and Existential Psychosis*" notes that Ellis "populates his novels with one fundamental character type [...] the existentialist alienated by the vapidness and sameness of commercial culture" (39), but Blazer focuses his study on Patrick Bateman's Oedipal complex rather than the existential condition underlying his psychosis. Similarly, Blazer's 2002 article on *American Psycho* makes passing reference to "existential chasms", the "world's nothingness", and Bateman's preoccupation with a "nameless dread", while predominantly discussing the novel in terms of its postmodern hyper-reality ("Chasms"). Considering the novel's numerous direct and indirect references to classic works of existential fiction, it is strange that this aspect of Ellis' most famous work has been neglected by literary criticism.

Fight Club, by contrast, has had much more attention as a work of existential fiction. *Stirrings Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature* devoted a whole edition to Palahniuk in 2005, containing several articles on *Fight Club's* treatment of existential themes. Jesse Kavadlo's article, "The Fiction of Self-Destruction: Chuck Palahniuk, Closet Moralists", picks up on Palahniuk's comment:

I'm not a nihilist. I'm a romantic. All of my books are basically romances; they're stories about reconnecting with community. (5-6)

Kavadlo then presents what he thinks is the book's moral purpose, basically, a warning against Tyler's philosophy of self-destruction, suggesting Tyler is a nihilist, but not Palahniuk, whose novels are actually "old fashioned romances" (22). Kavadlo's

understanding of existentialism is highly problematic, however; he introduces the “textbook existentialist tendencies” by quoting from the entry for “Literature of the Absurd” in M. H. Abrams’ *Glossary of Literary Terms* (Kavadlo 7, Abrams 1), and later he criticises Abrams for “characteris[ing] existentialism through the lens of Camus’ *Myth of Sisyphus*” (21). Kavadlo’s suspiciously reductive reading of *Sisyphus* leads him to the dubious claim that “Unlike Camus, Chuck Palahniuk is generous” (21), and his assertion that Palahniuk is “too romantic to be an existentialist” reads as a rhetorical flourish without solid grounding (21). Camus’ ideas of revolt, confrontation, and perseverance in the face of the absurd are not dissimilar to *Fight Club*’s emphasis on direct, unmediated experience, as Camus argues that “what counts is not the best living but the most living” (*Sisyphus* 58).

Robert Bennett’s astute article in the same edition of *Stirrings Still* argues that the narrator of *Fight Club* is a “postmodern existentialist who wants to deconstruct the meta-narratives of modernity until he can reach some deeper level of existence that precedes essence” (75). Furthermore, Bennett draws an insightful distinction between character and author, suggesting that Palahniuk’s use of existential themes often verges on ambivalence or even parody, that he “engage[es with] existentialism without either taking it too seriously or dismissing it altogether” (78). Bennett notes that *Fight Club* would suffer, as entertaining fiction, if it were to follow too closely the abstract ideals of philosophical discourse rather than the author’s distinctive gritty realism, concluding that Palahniuk was careful not to let any one discourse compromise the quality of the novel. This is a valid and useful point to make; however, we must consider that Palahniuk *does*, to a degree, integrate philosophy with his fiction. In an interview with Tasha Robinson, Palahniuk is questioned about his use of philosophy, including that of those considered existentialists like Camus and Kierkegaard. When asked “Do you consciously write to meet philosophical theories you’ve read?” he responds “Totally consciously”.

In order to demonstrate how *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* engage with the philosophical thought and attitudes of existentialism it is first necessary to outline what is meant by the term. Historically, existentialism can be understood as an intellectual movement that flourished in Europe in the 1940s and 50s. In 1945 the term was adopted as a self-description by Jean-Paul Sartre, who became the philosophy's most well known figure. The term was also applied to others, such as Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers—two German thinkers who had had profoundly influenced Sartre—as well as Sartre's French contemporaries Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus. The roots of the movement were traced back into the nineteenth century, and thus the label was posthumously applied to Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. Partly because of the public profiles of Sartre and Camus, existentialism grew to become not just a philosophy, but a cultural movement as well (Cooper 1-2).

In relation to my thesis, it is important to note the significance of existentialism as a literary phenomenon. In the popular imagination, it is not surprising that the ideas of Sartre and Camus were better known through their fictional works—novels such as Sartre's *Nausea* (1938) and Camus' *The Outsider* (1942)—than through their strictly philosophical tomes. In the postwar period a number of writers thought to deal with existential themes were linked under the term, such as Samuel Beckett, as well as those linked retrospectively, such as Kafka and Dostoyevsky. David Cooper, in one of the more recent book-length accounts of existentialism, *Existentialism: A Reconstruction* (1990), is at pains to clarify the philosophy from its image in the popular imagination—the characterisation which “many people associate with the existentialist picture of the human being” (3)—and to emphasise the subtleties and diversities, as well as the underlying coherence, of existentialist thought. He identifies an “over-reliance on existentialist fiction” as one source of the widespread “misconceptions” that surround the philosophy (12).

In contrast, this thesis *is* concerned with existentialism as a legacy in the popular imagination, with the literary inheritance that Cooper dismissively calls “terms of art” (4). My concern is more with existentialist aesthetics in literature, with the artistic expression of the ideas, than with the philosophical resolution of the ideas themselves. Thus, the following introduction to existentialism is intentionally brief, a survey of the terrain, as a thorough account of the complexities of the philosophical movement is well beyond the scope and function of this thesis. For this reason I draw heavily on Sartre and Camus—“the two main voices of postwar French intellectual life” (Aronson 2), no doubt at the expense of other important thinkers. I have also chosen to focus on the atheistic vein of the philosophy, instead of the less prominent theistic existentialism argued by those such as Gabriel Marcel and Kierkegaard, as, in Sartre’s thinking, “the notion of a religious existentialist” becomes a “virtual self-contradiction” (Cooper 2). In summarising the popular conception of existentialism he so valiantly tries to surpass, Cooper provides a tidy synopsis of the ideas I hope to elucidate:

Existence [...] is a constant *striving*, a perpetual *choice*; it is marked by a radical *freedom* and *responsibility*; and it is always prey to a sense of *Angst* which reveals that, for the most part, it is lived *inauthentically* and in *bad faith*. And because the character of a human life is never *given*, existence is *without foundation*; hence it is *abandoned*, or *absurd* even. (3-4)

The special sense of the word “existence” from which existentialism derives refers to “the kind of existence enjoyed by human beings”, and those aspects of human being which are distinct from other kinds of being, such as that of animals or objects (Cooper 2). Of these aspects, existentialism focuses primarily on the human capacity for self-reflection and the ability to alter one’s existence based on that awareness. Furthermore, a human existence is always a process of becoming: at any given time, our intentions for the future are a vital aspect of our present selves (Cooper 3). This idea is summarised by Sartre’s

famous slogan “existence precedes essence” (“Existentialism Is a Humanism” 22); a human being is not a fixed entity, like a stone, because one’s “essence”, *what* one is, is always tied to what one is becoming: a pursuit of projects resulting from reflection on “existence”, *that* one is (Crowell 2). Thus, Sartre states: “existentialism will never consider man as an end, because man is constantly in the making” (“Existentialism” 52). This process of becoming raises the question of what to become, as, for the existentialist, there is no fixed human essence (Cooper 2-3). Because there is no *inherent* meaning in life or in the world itself, Sartre states that “man is condemned to be free” (“Existentialism” 29). Freedom gives the individual the responsibility to choose what to be, to choose the values one wishes to hold, and, in a sense, to engage in creating one’s own meaning in the world (Crowell 2.3). However this freedom can also be a source of angst, or anxiety.

An important distinction is necessary between angst and fear, in that while both register a threat to which the self feels vulnerable, fear has an object—some entity of the world that is threatening, whereas angst has no direct object. Instead, the phenomenon of angst registers a “metaphysical fear”, and as such, can have numerous sources, such as the awareness of freedom, nothingness, alienation, and death (Cooper 127-29). In realising one is responsible for one’s identity and meaning in the world, that very freedom can lead to a sense of vertigo in that, in the absence of any supporting ground, there is an abyss or void, a “nothingness”, underlying existence. This aspect of existential freedom can be understood by imagining oneself on the edge of a cliff and realising that one fears not only the possibility of falling, but also the possibility of throwing oneself off; there is, essentially, nothing holding one back, no predetermined course of action (Cooper 129-30). As such, vertigo serves the existentialists as a favourite metaphor for angst, a feeling that Kierkegaard called the “dizziness of freedom” (qtd. in Cooper 130).

A recurrent existential theme is that of the alienated self, estranged from the world and even from its own identity. This experience is in contrast with the ancient concept of the

cosmos, “in which human beings have a well-ordered place” (Crowell 2.2); instead, “in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. [...] This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity” (Camus, *Sisyphus* 4-5). The absurd nature of existence is also to be found in freedom, for freedom leads us to choose values in order to engage with the world, as without values nothing would appear more worth doing than anything else and one would be “paralysed” (Cooper 143). However, the act of choosing indicates there are other choices as possibilities, and is an act made without a universal basis of support or justification. It is within this tension, between our solemn commitment to our values in the absence of solid justification, that absurdity is also to be found (Cooper 142-43).

Sartre used the term “bad faith” to describe the condition in which an individual attempts to deny or evade the anxiety of freedom (*Being and Nothingness* 70-71). Bad faith can be understood as self-deception, in the sense that the individual fails to take stock of the ambiguity and multi-faceted nature of human existence, and instead, for example, attempts to identify himself solely with the view others have of him, or lives in the past, taking refuge in a past self while ignoring his responsibility for the future (Cooper 117-19). The existential notion of authenticity refers to the individual’s capacity to recognise that one is a being who can be responsible for who one is (Crowell 2.3). It is in this sense that Sartre asserts, in his lecture “Existentialism Is a Humanism” (1946), that existentialism is a philosophy of hope and a “doctrine of action” (54), and not intended, as some critics of the movement suggested, “to plunge mankind into despair” (53). For existentialism asserts that, in choosing “freedom as the foundation of all values” (48), man can create a meaningful life, assert himself as an individual, and find the strength to carry on in the face of life’s difficulties and contradictions. Thus, Sartre asserts: “what people reproach us for is not essentially our pessimism, but the sternness of our optimism” (38).

The following two chapters of this thesis are dedicated to the analysis of *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* as existential texts by making frequent reference to the classic existentialist texts that inform these two novels, as well as the modifying effects of the influence of the postmodern milieu on the symptoms of existential crisis. The final two chapters are devoted to elucidating two distinguishing features of the existential aesthetic of these two novels: the depiction of violence within an existential framework, and the use of Gothic conventions to represent the existential condition. This project points us toward the nature of existential expression at the end of the twentieth century, how it differs from the past, why it is so violent, and why it has taken a Gothic turn.

Chapter One

Existential Thought in *American Psycho*

American Psycho is an account of one man's confrontation with the absurd, the awareness of which places him in the grip of a profound existential crisis that often appears to take the form of psychosis. Bret Easton Ellis' novel, which draws inspiration from Sartre's exploration of the existentialist point of view in his classic novel *Nausea*, engages with a range of existential themes, such as the absurd, artificiality, bad faith, nothingness, and the burden of freedom. *American Psycho*'s narrator, Patrick Bateman, is an embodiment of the archetypal existential hero, an alienated outsider with a profound detachment from others and even from his self. Like *Nausea*'s Roquentin, he lives alone and his engagement with other people is superficial and tainted by misanthropy. A sense of the absurd seems to encroach on nearly all aspects of *American Psycho*, providing the main source for the novel's dark satiric humour. Ellis integrates the existential tradition with the social satire of his critique of modern consumer culture to evoke the bad faith of an existence neurotically obsessed with greed, conformity, and excess. The novel's preoccupation with surface serves to accentuate the existential void gaping beneath the veneer of prosperity and success. His portrait of Patrick Bateman's individual existential crisis forms a potent metaphor for the callous hypocrisy and psychological incarceration Ellis finds in "free" American society.

Before the novel proper begins, Ellis presents an epigram taken from Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*. Largely due to his disturbingly compelling depictions of human irrationalism in his fictive works, Dostoyevsky was adopted as a forerunner of modern existentialism by the existentialist philosophers in the 1950s (Scanlan 5). In particular, *Notes from Underground*—which tackles themes of freedom, human essence, heightened

consciousness, and egotism—has been viewed as a proto-existentialist novel (Scanlan 69). In quoting Dostoyevsky, Ellis indicates a parallel between Patrick and the narrator of *Notes*, the painfully isolated and excessively self-conscious Underground Man. The first line of *American Psycho*, “ABANDON HOPE ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE” (1), alludes to Dante’s inscription above the gates of hell in his *Inferno*, and, as Elizabeth Young points out, the reader, on entering the novel, is sent into a “circle of hell”, complete with “imprisoning, claustrophobic qualities” from which they cannot escape (“Beast” 93). The allusion to Dante is satiric, for the world of Patrick and his acquaintances is hellish in its absurdity. This becomes clear when we consider that the opening inscription forms a loop with the last line of the novel “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT”, an allusion to Sartre’s play *No Exit (Huis Clos)* (Giles 169), an absurdist work in which three people are damned to hell, where they are kept in a room together, ultimately realising that “Hell is—other people!” (47). Patrick eventually comes to a similar realisation himself, twice remarking “my life is a living hell” during the novel’s typically inane dinner conversations (136, 333), and his existential psychosis is, in part, a reaction to his awareness of the absurdity of his existence.

Ellis describes himself as a “non-narrative writer”, evident in *American Psycho* in that the monotony and repetitions of Patrick’s life are reflected in the novel’s structure: sequences of seemingly “random” scenes in which the “effect is a cumulative one” rather than “plot-driven” (Clarke 76). As such, the form of the novel reproduces Roquentin’s despairing perception of life’s meaningless tedium: “nothing happens. The settings change, people come in and go out, that’s all. There are never any beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, it is an endless, monotonous addition” (61). *Nausea* is structured as a first person diary account sorted under chapters which plainly state details of time, day of the week, and location. This effect is reproduced in Ellis’ novel where, as Young notes, the “monotone” of Patrick’s “robotic” existence is conveyed through generally short chapters with “blandly factual headings” (“Beast” 101).

There are numerous scenes in *American Psycho* which demonstrate the absurdity of Patrick's existence. Consider the second chapter, a mind-numbing five page paragraph of detail describing Patrick's apartment and morning toilet routine (23-28). Or the chapter "Christmas Party" where midgets dressed as Santa's elves serve refreshments, and during which characters constantly mistake each other's identities because everyone looks more or less the same—a reoccurring motif throughout the novel which emphasises an overall concern in Ellis' oeuvre with de-individualisation. During a dinner with Armstrong, a man who "drones on" like a tourist brochure about the benefits of holidaying in the Bahamas, Patrick participates in the banal conversation "almost involuntarily", while imagining "slicing a wrist, one of mine, aiming the spurting vein at Armstrong's head or better yet his suit, wondering if he would still continue to talk" (134, 135). This scene recalls Roquentin's dinner with the Autodidact, who "babbles on and his voice buzzes gently in my ears. But I don't know what he's talking about any more. I nod my head mechanically" (*Nausea* 176). During this dinner Roquentin thinks: "I can feel that I could do anything. For example plunge this cheese-knife into the Autodidact's eye" (177), a passing fancy that Patrick echoes when, during a dinner with Evelyn, he thinks:

Dimly aware that if it weren't for the people in the restaurant I would take the jade chopsticks sitting on the table and push them deep into Evelyn's eyes and snap them in two, I nod, pretending to listen, but I've already phased out and I don't do the chopsticks thing. (*American Psycho* 321-22)

In the absence of any real meaningful connection with other people, normal human interaction becomes a painful chore for these existential protagonists, with violent undercurrents lying latent beneath the surface.

This vapidty takes on an overtly existential dimension in the absurd babble of the chapter "Another Night", during which Patrick and his acquaintances hold a conference call to try to decide where to go for dinner. Here, during fifteen or so pages of *nada*,

Patrick experiences “mindless delirium” (304), his friend McDermott comments “the void is actually widening” (308), and, when asked why he doesn’t want to go to a particular restaurant, Patrick replies: “Because I’m gripped by an existential panic” (309). Although he claims this self-diagnosis is a “lie”, just another joke in the endless immature jousting of the conversation, it can alternatively be read as a moment of lucidity, a fleeting awareness of the void gaping beneath his life, a reading strengthened by further moments of self-reflection later in the novel during the chapter “End of the 1980s”.

One way of describing the absurd in existential literature is to evoke a sense of artificiality in the surrounding world. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus writes of a moment of awakening in which “the stage-sets collapse” so that “one day the ‘why’ arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement” (11). He suggests that sometimes the “stage-scenery masked by habit” can cease to confer a sense of normality (13), and in this interruption we can perceive the world from a detached distance as something “foreign and irreducible to us” (12). He elaborates:

At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise. (12-13)

For Camus, the “hostility” and “strangeness” of the world constitutes the absurd in that humans are incapable of finding the inherent meaning they so desperately seek (13).

In *Nausea*, Roquentin describes his perception of the “unsubstantiality of things” prior to an attack of “Nausea” in similar terms to Camus: “Nothing looked real; I felt surrounded by cardboard scenery which could suddenly be removed” (112, 113). Later, during his encounter with the chestnut tree root, he experiences a “revelation”, in that he makes the leap from perceiving things as “stage-scenery” without “thinking that they existed” (182-83), to transcending the “surface” and grasping existence: “[the] veneer had melted” (183). However, this epiphany also brings with it the realisation that while

existence can be “*encountered* [...] you can never *deduce* it” (188) as “the world of explanations and reasons is not that of existence” (185). Hence Roquentin deems the world to be absurd as “there was *no reason* for it to exist” yet “*it was not possible* for it not to exist” (192). Thus, for both Sartre and Camus, an awareness of the surface artificiality of the world precedes the “revelation” of recognising the absurdity of existence—a necessary step towards accepting one’s freedom and responsibility.

In *Nausea*, Sartre uses the literary simulation of film technique to evoke Roquentin’s perception of the world’s absurdity and represent his state of existential crisis, an aspect of the novel examined in Patricia Johnson’s article “Art against Art: The Cinema and Sartre’s *La Nausée*” (1984). She notes that Sartre “frequently adopts angles and distances in his narrative that parallel the changing positions of a camera” (72), such as the satirical scenes in which Roquentin looks down as he criticises the bourgeoisie, or his use of “close-ups and long shots to modify his fictional universe” (73). Swift changes of lighting and focus are used to represent the visual deformation of Roquentin’s perception during his bouts of Nausea, alterations which undermine the “fixed, solid nature of objects [...] by cinematic means” (73). Sudden changes of perspective are used to unsettle the idea of a rational universe and instead create a feeling of contingency, such as the shift to a fly’s point of view in the moments before it is squashed: “It doesn’t see this gigantic index-finger looming up with the gold hairs shining in the sun” (*Nausea*, 150). Johnson suggests Sartre’s use of “unexplained juxtapositions” (74)—such as Roquentin’s imperceptible transition from consciousness to surrealist nightmare after he has sex with the “*patronne*” (88-89)—is akin to that of a director juxtaposing scenes in a film, in that both supply the audience with only the “raw material” from which to deduce the artistic intention (75).

It is pertinent then, to examine Ellis’ use of cinematic technique in *American Psycho* as a way of recreating the atmosphere of existential artificiality described by Camus and Sartre. As a figure whose existence lies somewhere in between conventional distinctions of reality

and fantasy, Patrick's perception of life through a cinematic lens is particularly apt. Critics have discussed the degree to which Patrick's "identity" is conveyed through the various discourses of consumer culture, such as "brochure-speak, ad-speak [...] the mindless soporific commentary of the catwalk or the soapy soft-sell of the market place" (Young, "Beast" 101). Mark Storey, in his discussion of the film's notoriously violent sequences, concludes that these scenes "are so over the top, so filmic, even comic book in the details we are given [...] that it seems like something taken from a book or a film" (60). He notes that Patrick's favourite movie, the hyper-violent *Body Double* (1984), and his extensive reading in the true-crime genre provide him with the narrative precedents of fictional and real-life killers with which to construct violent fantasies in which he can reassert the patriarchal dominance he fails to achieve elsewhere. Similarly the "cool, uninflected prose" with which Patrick describes his "real" sexual encounters reflects his engagement with pornographic films and literature (61), such as the sequence from "Inside Lydia's Ass" he describes on page 94 which is conveyed in the same tone as his sexual encounter with Courtney three pages later. During the sex murder sequence with Elizabeth and Christie, Patrick notes that events play out like "like in a movie" (277), and in a later sequence with the same trajectory "sex happens—a hard core montage" (291): a series of visualised sex scenes rather than an actual physical act.

In an interview with Jaime Clarke, Ellis makes a comment with regard to his novel *Glamorama* (1998) that is relevant to *American Psycho*: "Since it's such a consumer good and because the book is so full of consumer goods, why not throw in some porn amidst all the clothes and all that useless hipness?" (93). Pornography is used in *American Psycho* to highlight the connection between consumerism—the manufacturing of a product to suit a consumer demand, in this case sexual desire—and Patrick's existential crisis resulting from concerns such as artificiality and the absurd. When Patrick says "Last night I had dreams that were lit like pornography and in them I fucked girls made of cardboard" (186), he is

extending Roquentin's "cardboard scenery" to women (*Nausea* 113), who become not just sex objects in Patrick's imagination, but *actual* objects, suggesting that even in his imagination he cannot conceive of, or aspire towards, authenticity. The substitute for sex has superseded the actual act, because, for the individual like Patrick who has become alienated to the extreme by consumer discourses, "pornography is so much less complicated than actual sex, and because of this lack of complication, so much more pleasurable" (*American Psycho* 247).

The cinematic lens extends beyond the sex murder scenes to permeate almost all aspects of Patrick's reality. The phrase "like in a movie" appears on the first page of the novel and variations occur throughout. Camera techniques are described so as to create the fragmentary and detached perception Patrick has of his existence—his sense, like that described by Camus and Sartre, that the world around him is unreal. These references further disorientate and disrupt our expectations of realist narrative, such as the "smash cut" which instantly transports him from the lounge to the kitchen in the opening chapter (10), or the detective sleuth parody with which Luis Carruthers approaches while stalking Patrick in a shopping mall: "Like a smash cut from a horror movie—a jump zoom—Luis Carruthers appears, suddenly, without warning, from behind his column, slinking and jumping at the same time, if that's possible" (281). What is "possible" in the narrative has become somewhat irrelevant; this chapter begins with Patrick's loading a video hoping to watch a torture scene he recorded "last spring", but instead he finds a repeat of his favourite talk show with the topic "Tips on How Your Pet Can Become a Movie Star" (280), a contrast of the extreme and the banal that prompts the reader to consider which filmic layer is more bizarre and disturbing.

During an earlier scene in which he tries to murder Luis, Patrick's actions appear to play out in "slow motion", a hesitancy that leads Luis to misconstrue his homicidal intentions as a romantic advance. Hence, when he first sees Luis in the mall, Patrick's

perception lapses into fantasy as a distancing mechanism, describing a cinematic pastiche that encompasses all the clichés of stereotypical homosexuality:

suddenly I imagine Luis at some horrible party, drinking a nice dry rosé, fags clustered around a baby grand, show tunes, now he's holding a flower, now he has a feather boa draped around his neck, now the pianist bangs out something from *Les Miz*, darling. (280-81)

In this chapter the threat Luis poses to the homophobic Patrick seems to trigger these retreats into movie world illusion, just as the “smash cut” in the first chapter allows him to escape the frightening bohemian otherness of Evelyn’s arty dinner guests (10). A similar pattern plays out when Patrick has lunch with his ex-girlfriend Bethany, a woman who threatens him on multiple levels, having attained a level of financial success that undermines his patriarchal hegemony, as well as being romantically involved with the head-chef of Dorsia, an exclusive restaurant Patrick is never able to secure reservations at. This revelation prompts “a spastic, acidic, gastric reaction; stars and planets, whole galaxies made up entirely of little white chef hats, race over the film of my vision” (229). This “film” continues later on in a horrific murder scene where “As if in slow motion, like in a movie, she turns around” (230) and Patrick is able to violently reassert, probably in fantasy, the supremacy he lost in reality.

Further connotations of life and movie are evident when Patrick uses cinematic terminology to describe his experience of temporal transitions: the dusk “fades [...] in what seems like time-lapse photography but in slow motion, like a movie” (109); he lingers at the “scene” of an incapacitated victim, which becomes an amusing “tableau” (127); lunch with Bethany moves into “Scene Two” (227). During the penultimate chapter, introduced as “Another broken scene in what passes for my life” (374), Patrick says “I’m in a movie” and “I’m an actor” to explain why he seems familiar to the taxi driver who has taken him hostage (376), a lie which contains an element of psychological truth. Indeed,

Patrick wishes several times he was an actor, imagining himself “on television, in a commercial for a new product” (357), his commodity fetishism such that he *becomes* the advertisement. When he is embraced by his secretary Jean, he feels her warmth and comments:

I am so used to imagining everything happening the way it occurs in movies, visualizing things falling somehow into the shape of events on a screen, that I almost hear the swelling of an orchestra, can almost hallucinate the camera panning low around us, fireworks bursting in slow motion overhead, the seventy-millimeter image of her lips parting and the subsequent murmur of “I *want* you” in Dolby sound. (254-55)

Here cinematic stylisation intervenes to embellish reality into an exaggerated cliché, a fantasy substitute that allows Patrick to avoid meaningful human interaction.

This passage contains a definite echo of Dostoyevsky’s *Underground Man*, who says “I was so used to thinking and imagining things as they happened in books and picturing everything in the world as I myself had previously created it in my dreams” (111). Consequently, it is pointed out several times that the *Underground Man* can only express himself in a bookish way: Liza remarks “you [...] sound just like a book” (89), since he lacks meaningful engagement with the real world. Roquentin also comments “It seems to me as if everything I know about life I have learnt from books” (*Nausea* 95). Patrick is akin to the *Underground Man*, who uses his imagination to escape his worldly insignificance, admitting “I invented a life, so that I could at least exist somehow” (*Notes* 15); however, Patrick lacks the *Underground Man*’s lucid self-reflection, such that the grip of his delusions appears to be stronger.

Artificiality compromises the existential ideal of authenticity, while causing the individual to feel alienated. In her discussion of *Less than Zero*, Elizabeth Young comments: “in the postwar consumer boom people had become alienated not only from labour but

from their own lives, from their own desires and pleasures. These were re-packaged and sold back to them as part of the ‘leisure’ industry” (“Vacant Possession” 32). This “repackaging” of desires and pleasures is evident in the way Patrick experiences everything vicariously through the mediation of consumer culture, so that his reality becomes “a second-hand one” (32). Cinematic interventions become a filter through which Patrick can experience life at a distance, giving him the ability to manipulate his perception to his liking via solipsism, but also giving him a sense of existential crisis in that he cannot engage life meaningfully. This impulse renders his life “a blank canvas, a cliché, a soap opera” and the conversations around him, inane repetitive and hollow, become “Just words, and like in a movie, but one that has been transcribed improperly, most of it overlaps” (*American Psycho* 268, 380).

I wish to return now to Roquentin’s experience of Nausea, from which Ellis draws inspiration for Patrick’s own existential psychosis in *American Psycho*. In Sartre’s novel the feeling of Nausea is a by-product of “the recognition by consciousness of its embodiment, the realization that its existence is dependent on body”, and an awareness of the “contingence of all existents”, including the self (Barnes 23). This awareness causes Roquentin to experience an anxiety akin to feeling nauseous, a sensation which he describes as “a sort of sweet disgust. How unpleasant it was!” (22). Under the influence of Nausea the surrounding world takes on a frightening quality as Roquentin’s awareness of the contingency of objects makes them appear to come alive: “they touch me, it’s unbearable. I am afraid of entering into contact with them, just as if they were living animals” (22). The passages where Roquentin experiences Nausea often descend into parataxis and surrealist imagery as a way of evoking his heightened imagination—which borders on hallucination, madness, and fantasy, a stylistic aesthetic Ellis appropriates in his depiction of Patrick’s own form of existential psychosis.

Anxieties over status play a significant role in Patrick's predicament, and objects—especially expensive clothes and electronic gadgets—are significant status symbols in the obsessively materialistic yuppie circles he moves in. Consider the effects of the business card comparisons in the chapter “Pastels”, which causes Patrick to feel a “spasm of jealousy”, “Dizzy”, and “unexpectedly depressed” (42, 43). The objects have a symbolic power that induces effects similar to Nausea. During the chapter “Shopping”, in which Patrick becomes increasingly unhinged as he shops for Christmas presents, the action is punctuated by paragraphs of parataxis that list the objects he sees, creating a sense of the overwhelming superfluity of contemporary consumer culture. By the third of these paragraphs all punctuation has disappeared and been replaced by “and”, and, immediately after it trails off into ellipsis—denying us the finality of a full stop for a mire that never ends—Patrick comments: “Some kind of existential chasm opens before me while I'm browsing in Bloomingdale's” (172). Roquentin also feels the superfluity of existence. During his crucial encounter with the chestnut tree he comments that everything around him seems “arbitrary”, “isolated” and yet “overflowing”, an excess that extends to his self and all humanity:

We were a heap of existents inconvenienced, embarrassed by ourselves, we hadn't the slightest reason for being there, any of us, each existent [...] felt superfluous in relation to the others

[...]

I—weak, languid, obscene, digesting, tossing about dismal thoughts—I too was superfluous. (184)

Ellis appropriates and updates Roquentin's feelings of disgust for the contingency of an overabundant mass of meaningless existents for his own purpose of satirizing the excess of consumer culture by presenting us, with a whiff of sardonic absurdity, the “existential chasm” of the shopping mall.

Just as Patrick tends to see other people as objects to be consumed, so too does he objectify his own body, neurotically working out at the gym and spending hours in front of the mirror keeping his appearance perfect. Patrick frequently checks his reflection in whatever reflective surface is to hand, and when he visits his mother in some sort of retirement residence he tells us he has spent the last hour “studying my hair in the mirror I’ve insisted the hospital keep in my mother’s room” (351). This level of narcissistic concern with one’s reflection seems to hint at a deeper disturbance, and recalls the comments of Estelle, a character in Sartre’s play *No Exit*, who says “When I can’t see myself I begin to wonder if I truly exist [...] When I talked to people I always made sure there was [a mirror] nearby” (19-20). His appearance is something Patrick is especially proud of, but at the same time it is a source of intense self-consciousness. When he has lunch with Bethany, Patrick is “extremely nervous” (221), partly because he is anxious about a new brand of mousse he is wearing. Suddenly, he senses the “shape” of his hair has been “somehow altered”, prompting him to note: “A pang of nausea that I’m unable to stifle washes warmly over me” (222). Appearance is obsessively linked to wealth and status throughout the novel, and here a heightened perception of the contingency of his hair causes a rupture in Patrick’s reality reminiscent of Roquentin’s own experience of *Nausea*.

The passages in *Nausea* where Roquentin feels the weight of his existence and lurches out into the streets in a psychotic haze bear a striking stylistic resemblance to Patrick’s own mental breakdowns. In one such passage Roquentin buys a newspaper, experiencing a sensory overload as he notes the “smell of ink” and the feel of the paper crumpling between his fingers, exclaiming “God, how strongly things exist today” (146). He reads an article about a girl called Lucienne who has been raped and killed, and the story seems to seep into his reality, his consciousness of violence and the contrast of life and death invigorating his perception further, so that everything becomes contingent and threatening:

the pavement, the houses which “close in on [him]” (146), and his “ears” which “race along behind” him (147). The story of Lucienne becomes a vacillating hallucination in which he visualises her (“the fingers of the little girl who was being strangled [...] scratching the mud” (147)) while also seeming to experience her pain (“I...raped” (146)) as well as becoming her attacker: “I flee, I am a criminal with bruised flesh” (148). The monologue slips in and out of the third person (“am I mad? He says he is afraid of being mad” (148)) and runs on for four pages in an extraordinary cacophony of frenzied parataxis, stream of consciousness, repetitions, and gibberish.

Compare this to Patrick’s disintegration in the chapter “Chase, Manhattan”, where the inanity of the dinner conversation, and his supposedly irrepressible bloodlust, cause him to “become unglued, plummeting into a state of near vertigo that forces me to excuse myself” (334). Once out on the street the text does away with full stops altogether, entering into breathless paragraphs of parataxis ushered in and out by ellipsis rather than proper sentences with definite beginnings and ends. The content reads like a parody pastiche of an action movie chase; Patrick, in a state of what Julian Murphet calls “existential free fall” (61), kills a saxophonist, is chased by the police, steals a cab and crashes it into a fruit stand, kills a policeman in hand-to-hand combat, shoots the gas tank of a police car causing it to explode, and so on. Like Roquentin and the newspaper article, Patrick’s dream-like fantasy here is constructed from an external source, the cinema: “guns flashing like in a movie and this makes Patrick realise he’s involved in an actual gunfight of sorts [...] the dream threatens to break” (336). This detachment from reality is registered by the prose, which drifts into the third person and back. A disconnection is also suggested between Patrick’s mind and his body, which “feels infected, like gasoline is coursing through his veins instead of blood” (336), articulating a sense of strange revulsion for the corporeal, akin to Roquentin’s description of his “flesh which swarms [...] the sweet sugary water of my flesh, the blood of my hand, it hurts” (*Nausea* 148). Elizabeth

Young sees this chapter of *American Psycho* as blatant evidence of Patrick's unreliability as a narrator, "the final nail in the coffin of Patrick's credibility" ("Beast" 115), one of the numerous indicators in the text that call into question the authority of his narrative.

Sartre uses surrealist imagery in hallucinations and dreams to evoke Roquentin's perception of the threatening strangeness of a world in which: "I am in the midst of Things, which can not be given names. Alone, wordless, defenceless, they surround me" (180). During the famous sequence with the chestnut tree the "diversity of things, their individuality," disappears, but the true nature of existence is perceived as upsettingly surreal: "soft, monstrous masses, in disorder—naked, with a frightening obscene nakedness" (183). In the nightmare he slips into after having sex with the *patronne*, her body becomes a garden swarming with insects and "horrible animals" (89). At the end of the novel he wonders if the other people in the town of Bouville will start to see things as he has seen them, imagining a stream of terrifying surrealist images, such as a pimple that splits open to reveal an eye; a man whose tongue becomes a centipede; or someone who wakes to find their bed has turned into a "forest of rustling pricks" oozing sperm and blood (226).

While Patrick's imagination encroaches on similarly surrealist territory, the reader is left uncertain how seriously to take these stylistic references, which can be read as an ironic parody of the aesthetic of novels like *Nausea*. During a business meeting, Patrick recalls how he "lost it completely in a stall at Nell's—my mouth foaming, all I could think about were insects, lots of insects", and a few sentences later he looks over at Luis Carruthers, imagining that "in one brief, flashing moment his head looks like a talking vagina and it scares the bejesus out of me" (104). These images manifest themselves during moments of heightened strain and anxiety, for example, after the departure of the detective—who is investigating the disappearance of Paul Owen, a business rival who Patrick claims to have killed—"the door closing sounds to me like a billion insects screaming, pounds of bacon

sizzling, a vast emptiness” (266). Some of these images tempt a symbolic reading as an insight into Patrick’s psychology, such as the “footage in the film in my head” which shows “blood pouring from automated tellers, women giving birth through their assholes, embryos frozen or scrambled” (330), a disturbing combination of several of the themes of the novel: degradation, detachment from reality, the association of money and violence. By the end of the novel, objects appear to have taken on a life of their own, similar to Roquentin’s experience of Nausea; Patrick tells us: “my automated teller has started *speaking* to me, sometimes actually leaving weird messages on the screen [...] like [...] ‘Feed Me a Stray Cat,’ and I was freaked out by the park bench that followed me for six blocks last Monday evening and it too spoke to me. Disintegration—I’m taking it in stride” (380). Patrick tries to appear sincere when he explains to Jean: “Sometimes [...] the lines separating appearance—what you see—and reality—what you don’t—become, well, blurred” (363); however, within the postmodern satire of the novel, it is clear that Ellis’ updating of Sartre’s surrealism also has a comic intention.

In *Notes from Underground*, the Underground Man goes to absurd lengths to defend “what is most precious and important [...] and that is our personality and individuality” (26). When an army officer moves him out of his way “as if he hadn’t even seen [him]” (44), the Underground Man spends years brooding over a way to avenge this snub to his human existence, eventually deciding to physically bump into the officer in the street. Patrick finds himself in similar situations, such as when he attempts to get the doorman of his building complex to take an interest in helping him to get a crack in his apartment ceiling fixed, but is instead “greeted by the expressionless mask of the doorman’s heavy, stupid face. I am a ghost to this man, I’m thinking. I am something unreal, something not quite tangible” (68). The doorman subsequently ignores him, and in the elevator up to his apartment, Patrick finds Tom Cruise, who also spurns his attempts to engage in conversation. The

Underground Man argues that a man will deliberately do what is against his reason and own best interest in order to preserve his “personality and individuality” as it is a fundamental aspect of human identity and existence. This is because “to *have the right* to desire what is even extremely stupid and not to be duty bound to desire only what is intelligent” is a manifestation of free will and therefore of existential freedom (26).

Patrick’s free will is frequently compromised by the dominance of materialism and conformity in his lifestyle. His violent outbursts can be understood as a way of coping with his ineffectiveness and insecurity in human interactions, a means of claiming back his autonomy in a twisted exacerbation of “*the right* to desire what is even extremely stupid”, a way he can try to reassert control. However, this attempt is not always convincing. When Patrick decides not to murder Patricia, his date for the evening, he muses:

She’s lucky, even though there is no real reasoning behind the luck. It could be that she’s safe because her wealth, her *family’s* wealth, protects her tonight, or it could be that it’s simply *my* choice. (74)

He really isn’t sure if the decision is his or not because he cannot make it independently of the discourses that dictate his actions, such as, in this case, the power of wealth and status. When he is at the video store trying to choose a film to rent he is suddenly “seized by a minor anxiety attack. *There are too many fucking movies to choose from* [...] almost by rote, as if I’ve been programmed, I reach for *Body Double*—a movie I have rented thirty-seven times” (108). Elizabeth Young reads this passage as part of Ellis’ critique of “consumer capitalism”, a system in which “we are offered a surfeit of commodities, an abundance of commodity choices, but this image of plenty is illusory” (“Beast” 104). From an existentialist point of view, here Patrick denies the anxiety of freedom over something as trivial as a movie rental. In another incident in which his acquaintances are listing all the different brands of bottled water they know, he becomes aware of the “silence I’m causing filling me with a nameless dread” and responds “numbly, by rote” (238). It is as if he is

aware of the absurdity that surrounds him, but is unable to assert his free will to acknowledge and confront it fully. Thus the absurdity of the situation is repressed along with his “personality and individuality” (Dostoyevsky 26), the humanity which is so important to the Underground Man.

The fragility of personal identity is a source of great pain for the existentialist protagonist. Roquentin “know[s] perfectly well that [he] exists”, but

when I say ‘I’, it seems hollow to me. I can no longer manage to feel myself, I am so forgotten [...] And exactly what is Antoine Roquentin? An abstraction. A pale little memory of myself wavers in my consciousness. Antoine Roquentin...And suddenly the I pales, pales and finally goes out. (*Nausea* 241)

The crux of the problem is that he is grappling with the fact that his existence might have no inherent meaning. This finds its echo in Patrick’s: “...there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory [...] *I simply am not there*” (362). This line forms part of a series of interesting existential monologues that occur while Patrick is having lunch with his secretary Jean in the chapter “End of the 1980s”. Scattered throughout the chapter, these passages can be read as a focalisation of the novel’s existential themes.

As Patrick is a highly unreliable narrator, we have to be cautious as to what degree we can take these soliloquies as truthful revelations of his inner self; it is entirely possible they function as self-deception or ironic self-parody. The first of these monologues describes a “desert landscape” that is “devoid of reason and light and spirit” (360). In this image—a symbolic depiction of Patrick’s perception of the real world—all idealism, humanity and emotion is utterly negated because

the world is senseless. Evil is its only permanence. God is not alive. Love cannot be trusted. Surface, surface, surface was all anyone found meaning in...this was civilisation as I saw it, colossal and jagged... (360)

A “senseless” world evokes Camus’ absurd “universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights” where “man feels an alien, a stranger” (*Sisyphus* 4). Patrick’s reference to a “desert landscape” recalls Camus’ terminology in *Sisyphus* where he too refers to the barren emptiness of contemplating the world’s meaninglessness as the “waterless deserts where thought reaches its confines”, before asserting that one must “examine closely the odd vegetation of those distant regions” rather than shy from the truth to be found there (8). This appears to be exactly what Patrick is doing in these monologues, but as we shall see his existential development—what he learns from his self-reflection—proves problematic.

Nietzsche’s famous maxim “God is dead” is reworded by Patrick so that the finitude and certainty of the word “dead” is discarded (*The Gay Science* 109). Nietzsche intended the phrase to indicate not just his atheism, but that the death of God meant, by implication, “the loss of grounding for the entire Western value system” (Brosman 46-47). Patrick’s phrase “God is not alive” introduces an ambiguity to the state of divine presence in the world; if God is neither alive nor dead perhaps the suggestion is that he was never there at all, that Western values have never been “grounded”. Sartre attributed to Dostoyevsky the assertion that “If God does not exist, everything is permissible”, calling this attitude “the starting point of existentialism” because of its implications for human freedom (“Existentialism” 28-29). Patrick’s allusion to this philosophical discourse—updated to the postmodern moment—is expressed with a weary irony that lacks the conviction or gravitas of its source material.

The reference to “surface” encapsulates the novel’s critique of superficial materialism and consumerism, but if we again refer to Nietzsche it can also be applied to consciousness. Nietzsche posits that consciousness arose from the human need to communicate with others, thus consciousness is defined in the terms of the herd and not the individual:

the world of which we can become conscious is merely a surface- and sign-world, a world turned into generalities and thereby debased to its lowest common denominator, - that everything which enters consciousness thereby *becomes* shallow, thin, relatively stupid, general, a sign, a herd-mark; that all becoming conscious involves a vast and thorough corruption, falsification, superficialisation, and generalisation. (*The Gay Science* 213-14)

Because of these limitations of consciousness, the individual can never really know himself on his own terms, only through the discourses of the herd: through collective consciousness. In her article “From Turgenev to Bitov: Superfluous Men and Postmodern Selves”, Anna Schur examines *Notes from Underground* for the proto-postmodern “malaise” of the “self’s derealisation—the dissolution of the autonomous, essential self that exists independently of language” (562-63), for example the Underground Man’s “bookishness” which alienates him from originality, real life, and his authentic self (570). This effect is heightened in the hyper-postmodernism of *American Psycho* where Patrick’s whole identity and experience of consciousness seems comprised of various snippets of consumer culture, such as his perception of life as a movie or an advertisement. Both Patrick and the Underground Man end up simulating “reality”, as well as simulating “the self” (571), without meaningfully engaging with either, hence Patrick’s realisation that he is “an abstraction [...] something illusory” (*American Psycho* 362). This is a problem for Roquentin too, who wonders “My existence was beginning to cause me serious concern. Was I a mere figment of the imagination?” (*Nausea* 127).

In the second passage Patrick vacillates, at first asserting that he is “noncontingent human being” without a conscience, an evil monster with “no more barriers left to cross” (362). But then doubt creeps in and he wonders “Is evil something you are? Or is it something you do?” (362), questioning the distinctions of essence and existence while undermining his certainty that his essence is evil. Throughout the novel he tries to prove to

the reader and himself that he has such an essence, but his efforts are unconvincing, as demonstrated by the readings of the novel by Young and Murphet who both emphasise Patrick's unreliability as a narrator. In his article "Reconciling Remorse in *Thérèse Raquin* and *American Psycho*", Steven Schneider argues that there is a discrepancy between what Patrick tells us—that "there is nothing inside this mass serial killer capable of feeling anything vaguely resembling remorse" (429), a view which many early reviewers of the novel accepted—and the evidence of his guilt, conscience, madness, and desire for confession and catharsis, all of which, Schneider argues, is "indicative of a manic depressive and possibly suicidal young man rather than a soulless, inhuman monster" (431). In a way, the psycho-killer discourse Patrick identifies himself with is yet another appropriation from contemporary culture which leads him further into what Sartre called "bad faith", and away from his authentic self.

The second passage ends "This confession has meant *nothing...*" (362). "Nothing" is a significant word for the existentialists, and for Camus, the word "symbolises that odd state of soul in which the void becomes eloquent" (*Sisyphus* 11). If we ascribe this degree of meaning to the word, it starts to stand out from the rest of the text of *American Psycho*. Patrick realises he has "nothing of value" he can offer Jean, and that their relationship, if it did develop, would still "probably lead to nothing" (364). Earlier in the novel Patrick seems to almost grasp the emptiness within: "I laugh manically, then take a deep breath and touch my chest—expecting a heart to be thumping quickly, impatiently, but there's nothing, not even a beat" (112). For a moment, it seems that here at the end of the novel he is becoming aware of the emptiness of his life, of his identity, and of the world around him. He seems poised, like Roquentin or Meursault, for a crucial moment of awakening or existential revelation.

The third and final monologue in "End of the 1980s" depicts "thousands upon thousands" of starving and dying people moving across "the southern deserts of Sudan"

(365). The language is heightened here, poetic in a way that stands out from the rest of the text. The “desert landscape” that Patrick had imagined at the start of the chapter becomes realised and strangely familiar; it is an image of suffering in Africa that the West is used to seeing on television. This connects to the images of the dispossessed people starving on the streets of New York who are taunted by Patrick and his associates throughout the novel. The focus moves in on one child who lies dying in the sand as others move past him, and the passage ends: “a spirit rises, a door opens, it asks “*Why?*”—a home for the dead, an infinity, it hangs in the void, time limps by, love and sadness rush through the boy...” (365). It seems Patrick’s consciousness is moving beneath the “surface” of his world—the capitalist system that has made him rich while so many others endure in dire poverty—to the void beneath the “success” of the West: the suffering of the developing world.

These passages are inter-cut with Jean’s telling Patrick that she loves him, a scene of heightened emotional impact in which repentance and salvation seems possible through the acceptance of love, a situation which can also be found in the Underground Man’s interactions with Liza or in Roquentin and Anny’s reunion in *Nausea*, both cases in which love fails or is rejected. For a moment it seems possible that Ellis will use this rather soppy device to somehow redeem Patrick, who wonders if he “might have the capacity to accept, through not return, her love” (364).⁷ This is tempting to the reader, as it is a convention that might somehow make sense of the novel and justify the trauma the reader has endured to get through the challenges posed by the text. Although Ellis concludes this chapter with the optimistic remark, “anything is possible” (366), this is a foil, and, like Dostoyevsky and Sartre, Ellis withholds the sentimental closure of redemption through

⁷ The restaurant in which these monologues occur is called “Nowheres” (357), and when considered alongside some of the other venues in the novel—such as “No Man’s Land” (333) and “Tunnel” (50), as well as the clubs in *Less Than Zero* like “Nowhere Club”, “The Edge” and “Land’s End” (95)—it seems that Ellis is making a running joke about the existential emptiness of these venues where people ostensibly go to come together (see Sahlin 32).

love, leaving Patrick in a state of stasis, unable to break free from his torment of himself and others. In his article “Dostoevsky’s Hell on Earth: Examining the Inner Torment of the Underground Man”, Christopher Garrett comments that “Dostoevsky shows characters who, being unable to love, experience [...] inner torment during mortality. He typically portrays their condition as an illness; some may even consider them mad or insane” (52). In the same way, Ellis leaves Patrick in his own “inner hell” on earth (333), an inferno with “NO EXIT”.

While Patrick might be aware of the artificiality of the world and, at times, the absurdity that surrounds him, he does not move, as Roquentin does, beyond this to realise that, because of the absence of any inherent meaning in an absurd world indifferent to man’s aspirations, he has the opportunity to make freedom the basis of his own project of attempting to make his life meaningful. He does not even take up the struggle of Camus’ Sisyphus who resolutely continues the effort of living as an act taken in open defiance of the absurd. Instead, Patrick turns away from the existential insights he displays, and the end of the novel suggests he will remain in the bad faith and ennui of his life of conformity and consumerism. In this sense, Patrick is more like the Underground Man, who remains underground, embittered, misanthropic, and alone, but without the clarity of the Underground Man’s insights into the paradoxical nature of his situation, whereby he effectively rejects a normal life in the outside world while also desiring such a life, and rejects other people while also feeling the contradictory impulse to overcome his loneliness and engage other people.

Patrick also experiences these conflicts, engaging in bizarre psychotic behaviour while at the same time

sobbing “I just want to be loved,” cursing the earth and everything I have been taught: principles, distinctions, choices, morals, compromises, knowledge, unity,

prayer—all of it was wrong, without any final purpose. All it came down to was: die or adapt. I imagine my own vacant face, the disembodied voice coming from its mouth: *These are terrible times.* (332)

This quotation displays Patrick's awareness of the absence or loss of inherent meaning, as well as registering the pain and confusion that this entails, but not the subsequent desire to *find* a "purpose" beyond the dead end of his psychotic fantasizing. Thus, the existentialist element of *American Psycho* focuses on the symptoms of existential crisis rather than the resolution of those symptoms through the Sartrean quest for meaning. The quotation can also be read as a sardonic self-parody of existential angst, by which Patrick employs an ironic twist to maneuver away from the gravitas of actually confronting the sources of this melodramatic despair.

Patrick's crisis is based on universal existential concerns, fundamentally comprising the angst arising from the variety of sources discussed in the introduction to existentialism in chapter one, such as the awareness of the absurd, freedom, nothingness, alienation, and death (Cooper 127-29). However, some of these sources find heightened or hyperbolic expression in conditions particular to the contemporary milieu of Ellis' novel, which emphasises the crippling effects of a society obsessed with wealth and status. Thus, existentialism is used to evoke what Young calls the "boring, mundane heart of postwar capitalism" ("Beast" 104), exposing the conformity and bad faith of becoming enslaved to the discourses of a way of life dictated by greed, excess and commercial interests. In this way the existential framework of the novel complements the social satire of Ellis' critique of the vacant hypocrisy of American society, with its insidious politics and economic policies that widen the gulf between those who have, represented by the grotesque excess of Patrick's circle of cronies, and those who have not, signified by the poverty of the homeless people who haunt the background of the novel, shuffling through its pages just as the specter of domestic inequality agitates the edges of American consciousness.

These contemporary sources of existential crisis may seem obvious to the reader, but Patrick never becomes sufficiently lucid to identify them as a serious problem for himself; he is incapable of rejecting or questioning the consumer culture that, in turn, is consuming him. Freedom evades Patrick, and if Patrick is a “metaphor” for what Ellis finds wrong about “the 80s”, as he has stated in one interview (Amerika), then perhaps his point—in leaving Patrick trapped in his existential hell—is that freedom is evading the American people. In another interview Ellis states: “even though I might be writing about a specific time and a specific place, hopefully it’s in such a way that a reader can connect it to a larger metaphor—alienation, pain, America, the overall tone of the culture” (Clarke 87), a comment that evokes the novel’s engagement with the tension between the universal nature of existential crisis and the simultaneous specificity of its expression, catalysed and shaped by the historical moment and situation of the subject experiencing it. In *American Psycho*, the contemporary milieu emphasises the existential themes of artificiality, alienation, the loss of free will, and the denial of freedom entailed by bad faith, rather than following the existential quest paradigm to its conclusion by moving beyond these symptoms towards the redemptive potential of the philosophy: the “doctrine of action” and “optimism” described by Sartre in “Existentialism Is a Humanism” (54, 38). It seems such confidence in man’s powers of redemption is not in keeping with the cynical and pessimistic tone Ellis employs in the satire of *American Psycho*, which registers the author’s anger and frustration with the banality of contemporary American culture.

An inconspicuous but symbolically significant incident within the novel illustrates this argument. On the streets of New York Patrick spots a “young, pretty homeless girl” sitting, “her head bowed down, staring dumbly into her empty lap”, a “Styrofoam coffee cup resting on the step below her feet”, and, in a rare moment of sympathy, probably prompted by the attractiveness of the girl, Patrick drops a dollar into her cup. However, he has completely misread the situation: the cup contains coffee, and the girl is not slumped

over in resignation at her poverty; instead, she is actually reading a “book—Sartre” (82). “[W]hat’s your goddam problem?” she shouts at him, asking the question he is incapable of asking himself, to which he responds:

cringing, I stutter, “I didn’t... I didn’t know it was... full,” and shaken, I walk away [...] I hallucinate the buildings into mountains, into volcanoes, the streets become jungles, the sky freezes into a backdrop [...] I have to cross my eyes in order to clear my vision. Lunch at Hubert’s becomes a permanent hallucination in which I find myself dreaming while still awake. (83)

Here Patrick tries to fill a void the only way he knows how: with money. But the girl possesses something (other than coffee) that he does not: the philosophical worldview which perhaps holds the key to his condition. As Patrick does not notice the title, we do not know which of Sartre’s texts she is holding; but the girl knows what book it is, and she is in the process of finding out what it says. In a moment that is reminiscent of an event later in the novel when Patrick’s ex-girlfriend Bethany asserts her cultural superiority to him by pointing out that he has hung his expensive David Onica painting upside down (234-35), here Patrick reacts to the threat imposed by the abrupt empowerment of the girl—the instantaneous shift in his perception of her from a victim whom he can patronisingly humble to someone who is threatening *him*—by retreating into his own mind, his solipsism distorting the world around him to the extent that he cannot even tell if he is conscious or not. In “Existentialism Is a Humanism” Sartre states: “I cannot discover any truth whatsoever about myself except through the mediation of another” (41). But here Patrick, highly embarrassed at his mistake, attempts to escape the angst posed by the disruption of his hegemonic outlook on the world. The burden of freedom proves to be too heavy for him to shoulder.

Chapter Two

Existential Thought in *Fight Club*

Just as *American Psycho* contains a strong basis in existential thought, so too does Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. The existential journey undertaken by the narrator in *Fight Club* begins with his sense of the absurdity of the world and life's apparent meaninglessness. Initially, the narrator is a lonely, unhappy, young urban professional, who hates his soul-sapping job and appears to suffer from insomnia. This insomnia heightens his alienation from other people and everyday reality, his existence becoming an "out-of-body experience" in which "Everything is so far away, a copy of a copy of a copy [...] you can't touch anything and nothing can touch you" (19, 21). The narrator's doctor tells him "Insomnia is just a symptom of something larger. Find out what's actually wrong" (19). This "something larger" is the narrator's existential crisis and subsequent desire for a meaningful existence. His insomnia is an amplified form of Camus' "weariness", a feeling which—like Sartre's *Nausea*—is "sickening", but also a vital part of the process of existential awakening. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes:

one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. [...] Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. [...] What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery. In itself weariness has something sickening about it. Here, I must conclude that it is good. For everything begins with consciousness and nothing is worth anything except through it. (11-12)

This summary of existential quest encapsulates the basic philosophical movement of the narrator of *Fight Club*, who, sick and weary with his “mechanical life”, begins to search for meaning, embarking on a process of awakening to consciousness through his interaction with Tyler Durden, and eventually facing the consequent outcomes of “suicide or recovery” in the novel’s final chapters. His friend Bob mirrors the narrator’s initial desire for meaning and reason amidst what seems to be the futility of existence when he says “All my life [...] Why I do anything, I don’t know” (18), in effect posing the “fundamental question” that motivates Camus’ *Myth of Sisyphus*: why exist? (1). However, Camus’ framework is deployed by Palahniuk in a playfully ironic, almost derisive, manner which complicates the narrator’s journey to the extent that we are left unsure how seriously to take the novel’s engagement with existential thought.

The narrator finds that by participating in support meetings for people with chronic illnesses and pretending that he is similarly afflicted, he is able to simulate feelings of anguish in order to give him the release necessary to sleep. Conveyed in an ironic tone that recalls Patrick Bateman’s melodramatic expressions of angst in *American Psycho*, the narrator’s despair revels in nihilism and the absurdity of existence: “It’s easy to cry when you realize that everyone you love will reject you or die” (17). Surrounded by dying people, the narrator attempts to grasp mortality, saying “On a long enough time line, the survival rate for everyone will drop to zero” (17), a phrase which echoes the process of awakening which Camus describes as a man admitting “that he stands at a certain point on a curve that he acknowledges having to travel to its end. He belongs to time, and by the horror that seizes him, he recognizes his worst enemy” (12). For the narrator, the support groups are the beginning of this process. Camus suggests this awareness of mortality causes a “revolt of the flesh” which “is the absurd” (12), an outlook expressed in Palahniuk’s novel through frequent graphic references to bodily corruption, disease, and the grotesque. The characters in the novel all seem to revel in this morbidity and Marla could easily speak for

all three of the principals when she says “I embrace my own festering diseased corruption” (65).

As a way of coping with the onset of death, the support groups use guided meditation as a way of transcending pain, suffering, and fear, entering a state akin to that which Sartre uses as an example of the individual of bad faith who “realises herself as *not being* her own body, and [...] contemplates it as though from above as a passive object to which events can *happen* but which can neither provoke them nor avoid them because all its possibilities are outside of it” (*Being and Nothingness* 79). The philosophy of Tyler’s fight club—established later in the novel—is in direct opposition to this mystic escapism, but the narrator relapses into transcendental distancing techniques at several points during the novel as a way of avoiding reality and the pain of the flesh. At the start of the novel the narrator is living in bad faith on multiple levels: firstly, as a participant in support groups which attempt to soften and escape reality, gatherings which “all have vague, upbeat names” (18) where he “never [gives his] real name” (19); and secondly, as a physically healthy person the vampiric voyeurism of his indulgence in the suffering of the support group members, and his simulation of their despair in order to sleep, adds a further layer of bad faith to his existence.

It takes the gaze of Marla, another “faker” or “tourist”, to instigate a rupture in the delusion that the support groups are “the one real thing in [his] life” (24), leading the narrator to conclude that “Marla’s lie reflects my lie, and all I can see are lies. In the middle of all their truth [...] all of a sudden even death and dying rank right down there with plastic flowers on video as a non-event” (23). This “truth” is an illusion because the narrator is not experiencing death authentically, for as Camus says “in reality there is no experience of death. Properly speaking, nothing has been experienced but what has been lived and made conscious. [...] It is a substitute, an illusion, and it never quite convinces us” (*Sisyphus* 14). The narrator is aware of the inevitability of death, however, aware of

what Camus calls the “horror” of the “mathematical aspect of the event” (14), and in this certainty he also finds the absurd.

The “mathematical aspect of the event” is given hyperbolic expression in the nature of the narrator’s job, which is to apply a mathematical formula, on behalf of the car company he is employed by, in order to determine whether it is profitable to recall faulty vehicles. This effectively reduces the value of human life to monetary figures and statistics, thus feeding the narrator’s nihilistic impulses. His job requires him to fly around the country going to “meetings [his] boss doesn’t want to attend” and visiting fatal car crash sites (30). As he changes his watch back and forth as he crosses time zones, the narrator realises that the adjustments are futile; time is passing regardless, and this causes him to feel a sense of waste: “This is your life, and it’s ending one minute at a time” (29). On these flights he forms “tiny friendships” with “single-serving” friends (31), ultimately superficial and disposable. The narrator’s frustration is such that he enjoys the moments when the plane has trouble landing, the possibility of a crash removing all his other worries and leading him to think “Nothing matters” (31).

It is important to remember that Tyler and the narrator are the same person, and not entirely separate characters. However, as we read the novel through the point of view of the narrator—and he perceives Tyler as a character distinct from himself until right near the end of the novel (chapters 21 and 22)—we must keep both distinctions in mind when analysing the text. The narrator creates Tyler as a way of dealing with the absurdity of his existence:

I was tired and crazy and rushed, and every time I boarded a plane, I wanted the plane to crash. I envied people dying of cancer. I hated my life. I was tired and bored with my job and my furniture, and I couldn’t see any way to change things.

(172)

Tyler, on the other hand, does know how to change things; he 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” (174). The narrator’s fight for his human freedom, its gradual emergence and expression, is the central conflict of the novel. At first, Tyler is an aide in this process, but he steadily becomes an obstacle. Tyler allows the expression of the narrator’s repressed desires, the first being a liberation from property and the clutch of consumerism.

Like Ellis, Palahniuk deploys satire to critique the materialism of American society and popular culture. In a robotic tone reminiscent of Bateman’s monologues on the latest consumer necessities, Palahniuk’s narrator, a self confessed “slave to the nesting instinct” (43), parodies the discourse of the culture he is attempting to undermine, listing his purchases and suggesting the “IKEA furniture catalogue” has taken the place of pornography for his generation (43). Ironically the marketing of these products make them seem as if they are creating individuality, when in fact they entrench conformity, the narrator admitting that he and his peers “all have the same” distinctive designer items (43). As Elizabeth Young says in her discussion of *American Psycho*:

Within consumer capitalism we are offered a surfeit of commodities, an abundance of commodity choices, but this image of plenty is illusory. Our desires are mediated by ideas about roles and lifestyles which are themselves constructed by commodities and our “choices” are propelled by these constructs. (“Beast” 104)

The narrator’s obsession with objects is a coping mechanism for his encroaching sense of absurdity at the transience of life and the inevitability of death, creating a false sense of permanence, security, and resolution: “You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life [...] then for a couple of years you’re satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you’ve got that sofa issue handled” (44). But in reality they are no defence against the truths the narrator is beginning to grapple with, that “Nothing is static” and “Even the

Mona Lisa is falling apart” (49). Objects cannot protect him against his own mortality, the fact that “Someday I’d be dead without a scar and there would be a really nice condo [...] until the dust settled” (49). The discourses of commodification influence the narrator such that he sees himself as an object at times, saying “It’s nothing anymore to have a beautiful stock body [...] those cars that are completely stock cherry, right out of a dealer’s showroom in 1955, I always think, what a waste” (48), and he describes Marla as having “Italian dark leather sofa lips” (36). When he understands that “the things you used to own, now they own you” (44), he is giving Tyler—as a manifestation of repressed desire—license to destroy his apartment, a liberation which allows him to continue on the path towards confronting the void by “hitting the bottom” (70), and thus existential enlightenment. This is the first of many acts of self-destruction, as the hold the objects had over the narrator causes him to realise in retrospect that “It was me that blew up” (111).

In addition to parodying the discourses of consumerism *Fight Club*, like *American Psycho*, also advances a postmodern concern with the ubiquity of television and film as a mediating discourse between consciousness and reality. In *Survivor*, Palahniuk’s second novel, a character comments:

We all grew up with the same television shows. It’s like we all have the same artificial memory implants. We remember almost none of our real childhoods, but we remember everything that happened to sitcom families. (111-10)

This idea can be detected in *Fight Club* in that characters use fictional mediums to explain reality, such as the references to the movies *Psycho* and *Sybil* (173, 196), or when Tyler saves Marla and thus, “according to the ancient Chinese custom we all learned from television” (60), assumes responsibility for her. *Fight Club* uses the discourses of television and film to explore questions of existential authenticity and artificiality in much the same way that *American Psycho* does, but with far less intensity; the influence of pop culture over the

narrator of *Fight Club* is nowhere near as exaggerated as the crippling distortion it impresses upon the mind of Patrick Bateman.

Like Ellis, Palahniuk also uses elements of cinematic technique in his style, such as when the narrator is working with Tyler as “guerrilla terrorists of the service industry” and he looks out through the window of an elevator as it pauses between floors, viewing the world from “cockroach level” (81, 80). The guests they are serving become “gigantic” “titans” who view him as “just a cockroach” (80, 81). This moment is reminiscent of Sartre’s use of a fly’s point of view in *Nausea* (149-50), or the Underground Man’s description of himself as a mouse plotting revenge from “behind the stove” (Dostoyevsky 11), both instances of metaphorical imagery intended to heighten the alienation and insignificance of existence. Palahniuk’s appropriation of cinematic technique is also used to create textual ambiguity and narrative unreliability, such as the narrator’s use of a “fast-forward” at several points in the novel to create a literary jump cut in the narrative (22, 169, 171). And just as time can be manipulated so that it leaps forward like a videotape, so too can it be wound backwards; the story begins, after all, at the end, the narrative being related as a flashback in the minutes before the narrator expects to die. When describing Tyler’s hobby of splicing single frames of pornography into family films while working as a projectionist, the narrator comments:

Changeover.

The movie goes on.

Nobody in the audience has any idea. (28)

Here Palahniuk is making a sly reference to his own manipulation of two different reels in the text, the narrator and Tyler, and his role as author making changeovers between two characters in the same body while the reader often does not have “any idea” until the twist is revealed.

The formation of fight club allows the narrator to react against the absurdity and meaninglessness of popular culture and society by embracing self-destruction in order to facilitate the creation of authenticity, another version of the Underground Man's emphasis on the importance of the freedom to desire that which is "even extremely stupid and not be duty bound to desire only what is intelligent" (Dostoyevsky 26). This logic is rearticulated when the narrator of *Fight Club* says "my life just seemed too complete, and maybe we have to break everything to make something better out of ourselves" (52). The violent fight club gatherings, where men engage in one-on-one fist fights until either man submits, can be understood as a hyper-masculinised version of the "therapeutic physical contact" of the support groups (20). The benefits of the support groups, which had made the narrator feel "more alive than I'd ever felt" (22), are superseded by fight club: "You aren't alive anywhere like you're alive at fight club" (51). He has moved from finding life by simulating death, to reincarnation through brutalising the flesh in order to "feel saved" (51).

Fight club is about embracing nothingness, a cathartic emptying of the self by submitting to the primitive urge for violence: "Nothing was solved when the fight was over, but nothing mattered" (53). Fight club "isn't about looking good" (51), instead it attempts to cultivate physical prowess and self confidence outside the constructs of society, such as the demanding ethos prevalent in gyms "crowded with guys trying to look like men, as if being a man means looking the way a sculptor or an art director says" (50). It is therapeutic in that it allows the expression of repressed anger and a way to deal with fear: "Most guys are at fight club because of something they're too scared to fight. After a few fights, you're afraid a lot less" (54). Tyler instigates the first fight because he wants "to know more about himself" (52), embarking on an existential quest of self-discovery and engagement in creating one's own meaning in the world. Tyler's philosophy acknowledges the historical moment of the men of his generation who are without a "great war" or a

“great depression”, a battle or masculine challenge with which to provide them with meaning; instead, they have a “great war of the spirit” (149), an existential onus to create meaning amidst the apparent futility of the modern world.

Fight club seeks to remedy the feelings of emasculation its members feel in their society. Castration is a recurring motif in *Fight Club*, indicative of a wider theme concerning the crisis of masculinity. The narrator attends a support group for men with testicular cancer called “Remaining Men Together” (18), and there his therapy partner, Bob, has gone from a hyper-masculine body builder to an emasculated emotional wreck with “bitch tits” (17). Later in the novel Project Mayhem uses the threat of castration as a terrorist tactic against its opponents, including, eventually, the narrator himself, who says: “Picture the best part of yourself frozen in a sandwich bag” (188). Fight club is a reaction against consumerism in general, but particularly the feminisation of consumer culture. Tyler attacks the narrator’s materialist “nesting instinct” with its maternal qualities (43), and Tyler’s club counters what he perceives as the emasculation of men by society, particularly those wallowing in the meaninglessness of the service industry: “I see the strongest and the smartest men who have ever lived [...] and these men are pumping gas and waiting tables” (149). This phrase echoes the opening line of Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl”, published in 1956—“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness”, as well as the line “all the stars that never were are parking cars and pumping gas”, from Dionne Warwick’s song “Do You Know the Way to San Jose?” (1968). In connecting Ginsberg’s passionate cry against America to the mild complaint of the pop song, Palahniuk imparts added irony to Tyler’s attempt to rally against the wilting of masculinity.

Nietzsche’s concept of the “will to power” suggests that the aim of life is not mere survival, but the increase of one’s power: “the will to appropriate, dominate, increase, grow stronger” (Spinks 137). Nietzsche gives numerous examples from human history to demonstrate that life often risks death to increase its power, such as the Homeric warrior-

hero who performs dangerous feats in battle to win glory. Nietzsche sees the “will to power”—the harnessing of aggressive and ambitious drives—as necessary to living a passionate life, finding “a vision of life that burns brilliantly” preferable to simply “being a good person” (Solomon 85-87). In his essay “Homer’s Contest” (1872), Nietzsche discusses the importance of the contest (*agon*), the “finest Hellenic principle”, in the ancient world (100). In contrast to what he calls the “emasculated concept of modern humanity” which separates man from nature, Nietzsche admires the ancient Greeks for their acceptance of the inextricability of “natural” and “human” characteristics (95). Thus, while they are “the most humane people of ancient time”, the Greeks still possess “a trait of cruelty, of tiger-like pleasure in destruction” (95). He suggests that, in the Hellenic world, it is in the course of the contest—through the controlled expression of jealousy, envy, and competitive ambition—that cruelty and the desire for victory can be channelled into creation rather than destruction. He concludes that “every talent must develop through a struggle” and once that state of struggle is surpassed, and a man is without competition, the gods “entice him into an act of hubris, and he collapses under it” (98, 99).

This is one way of understanding the violence of fight club, as a revival of a contest in which the men can test themselves authentically rather than vicariously:

Fight club is not football on television. You aren’t watching a bunch of men you don’t know halfway around the world beating on each other [...] After you’ve been to fight club, watching football on television is watching pornography when you could be having great sex. (50)

Fight club allows the powerless to simulate the “will to power”; the narrator is able to “get [his] hands on everything in the world that didn’t work” (53). The primitive crucible of violence is a hyper-masculine reaction to modernity’s repression and denial of the natural instincts of anger and the physical will to dominate. When the narrator runs into him in the church basement where “Remaining Men Together” used to be held, Bob tells him

that the old therapy group has disbanded and that he has found a “new group”. Even *he* is rehabilitated by fight club; the narrator notices that Bob’s arms are “quilted with muscle and so hard they shine” (100). Instead of abusing steroids to look like a man, Bob’s muscles are now real.

Fight club allows the simulation of Oedipal conflict as a way of dealing with paternal abandonment. Tyler tells the narrator that he had been fighting his father in his mind during their first fight, a man he “never knew” (49). Tyler’s Oedipal impulse expresses the repressed resentment of the narrator, whose father abandoned his family to start several new ones, an action sardonically described by the narrator through the discourse of commodification as “set[ing] up a franchise” (50). The narrator dismisses his father’s advice to get married, thinking “I’m a thirty-year-old boy, and I’m wondering if another woman is really the answer I need” (51). At fight club the narrator perceives an atmosphere of bitterness that feeds off paternal indifference. Surveying the club’s members, he sees others like himself: “a generation of men raised by women” (50). However, if a mother substitute is not “the answer”, neither, apparently, is another father figure; the narrator wonders whether “Maybe we didn’t need a father to complete ourselves” (54).

Paul Kennett notes in his article “*Fight Club* and the Dangers of Oedipal Obsession” that the narrator “continually reaches out to the narrative of patriarchy, rooted in the Oedipal complex, to provide him with a meaningful existence” (48). He does this through Tyler, who is paradoxically both father-killer and father-figure, the rebellious son who eventually “succumbs to his nostalgic symptom for the patriarchy of old” by developing fight club into the neo-fascist Project Mayhem, an organisation which attempts to reverse the “decay” of the patriarchal past and overturn the “subjective deterioration” of masculinity in the historical moment of the novel’s milieu (55, 62). The narrator’s eventual

conflict with Tyler and Project Mayhem is both an Oedipal rejection of a paternal authority and an implicit condemnation of patriarchy as “a dangerous, fascist throwback” (48).

Throughout *Fight Club* Palahniuk appropriates Christian imagery as a way of underscoring Nietzsche’s “God is dead” maxim. Early in the novel the narrator parodies the Lord’s Prayer by appealing to Tyler as a saviour who will rescue him from the trappings of materialism: “Oh, Tyler, please deliver me [...] Deliver me from Swedish furniture [...] deliver me, Tyler, from being perfect and complete” (46). Tyler also functions as a father-figure to him, and when he is caught in the middle of Marla and Tyler’s relationship, he is reminded of his parents’ animosity for one another: “The moment Marla is out the door, Tyler appears back in the room. Fast as a magic trick. My parents did this magic act for five years” (71). Later in the novel, the sense of rejection the narrator feels when Tyler leaves him reminds him of his father’s abandonment of him as a child, as well as symbolising the modern spiritual malaise of living without faith in God. This absence of paternal and spiritual guidance motivates the narrator in his quest to find meaning. While Tyler tries to replace God with himself in his role as the fascist leader of Project Mayhem—“Tyler Durden the Great and Powerful [...] God and father” (199), the narrator becomes increasingly wary of this approach to filling the void.

These ideas are clarified in a scene where the narrator is taken for a ride in a car by some of Tyler’s Project Mayhem members, referred to as “space monkeys” because of their blind obedience to Tyler’s cause (138). A fight club member referred to as “the mechanic”—who acts as a mouthpiece for “Tyler Durden dogma”—tells the narrator that “If you’re male and you’re Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God” (141). By implication, Tyler and the narrator, who, like many of the novel’s characters, never knew their fathers, spend their lives “searching for a father and God” (141). The mechanic elaborates:

“What you have to consider [...] is the possibility that God doesn’t like you. Could be, God hates us. This is not the worst thing that can happen.”

How Tyler saw it was that getting God’s attention for being bad was better than getting no attention at all. Maybe because God’s hate is better than His indifference.

If you could be either God’s worst enemy or nothing, which would you choose?

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.

[...]

The lower you fall, the higher you’ll fly. The farther you run, the more God wants you back.

“If the prodigal son had never left home,” the mechanic says, “the fatted calf would still be alive.”

It’s not enough to be numbered with the grains of sand on the beach and the stars in the sky. (141)

Here, paternal desertion is conflated with the divine abandonment of Nietzsche’s “God is dead” theory; both involve a loss of faith and meaning in a higher authority. Tyler advocates rebellion as a solution to this existential crisis, the active pursuit of “hell” and punishment rather than the abyss of “nothing”. This rebellion is a development of the logic of the fight clubs, where the pain of physical punishment is preferred to the meaningless banality of consumer culture. The reference to “God’s worst enemy” creates a parallel with the rebellion of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, who also chose hell in preference to servitude and blind obedience to God, saying “Farthest from him is best” (I.247).

However, Tyler's assertion that "The lower you fall, the higher you'll fly" deviates from the story of the war in heaven, as, try as he might, Satan never reclaims heaven or salvation. Alternatively, the reference to the parable of the prodigal son demonstrates the possibility of salvation for the fallen; the father in the story does not punish his wayward son but extends to him his mercy and joy: "be glad, for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again: and was lost, and is found" (Luke 15.32). But this salvation is gained through repentance and humility, elements absent from Tyler's theory. Hence, the dissonance registered by these religious allusions causes us to question the soundness of Tyler's reasoning, creating a sense of unease and doubt as to where his philosophy is taking the narrator.

The assertion that "It's not enough to be numbered with the grains of sand on the beach and the stars in the sky" reveals a desire for meaning beyond the absurdity and indifference of the world. Several times throughout the novel the narrator expresses variations of the phrase "Look up into the stars and you're gone" (22, 31, 143, 192), echoing the conclusion of Camus' *The Outsider*, where Meursault looks up "at the mass of signs and stars in the night sky and [lays himself] open for the first time to the benign indifference of the world" (117). At this point Meursault has accepted the absurdity of life and realises he "is still happy", even on the eve of his execution (117). The narrator desires the resolution of Meursault's acceptance of the absurd, death, and the burden of freedom, but for Tyler—as the site of all the Homeric qualities society has repressed in the narrator—peaceful resolution is "not enough" and he chooses rebellion and destruction as the path to a authentic meaningful existence (*Fight Club* 141). During the gradual transition of fight club into Project Mayhem the more or less parallel philosophical paths Tyler and the narrator have been travelling begins to diverge and, eventually, come into direct conflict. This split is best understood in relation to Sartre's theory of the "project-of-being-

God” in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and Camus’ theory of revolution and “man in revolt” in *The Rebel* (1951), but first we must examine the motivation behind Project Mayhem.

A central existential theme deployed throughout *Fight Club* is authenticity. The binaries of the authentic and the inauthentic are principally expressed in relation to death, and repeated confrontation with the reality of pain, suffering, and mortality, is integral to the narrator’s journey. As Camus states, death is “an illusion” that “never quite convinces us” (*Sisyphus* 14), a fundamental fact that will nevertheless always be intangible to the living. In contrast to the guided meditation and transcendence practised by the support groups, fight club rejects the reduction of the body to a passive object. Instead, the fights become a way of embracing pain in order to grasp reality and wake up to the present, an attempt to escape bad faith.

This contrast is evident in the scene in which Tyler kisses the narrator’s hand before pouring lye onto the saliva, causing a chemical reaction which burns his hand “worse than [he has] ever been burned” (73). The narrator lapses into guided meditation to distance himself from his body and the experience of pain, but Tyler tells him that “this is the greatest moment of your life [...] and you’re off somewhere missing it” (77), forcing him to accept that he is “stupid” and that he “will die” (76). By the end of the scene, Tyler concludes that the narrator is “a step closer to hitting bottom” (78), and thus nearer to enlightenment via confrontation with the void. The same purpose is to be found in the scene with the mechanic, where the narrator is taken on a car ride with the intention of crashing, an experience which leads him to realise the immediacy of the present, the inevitability of death, and his own insignificance:

Now. The amazing miracle of death, when one second you’re walking and talking, and the next second, you’re an object.

I am nothing, and not even that. (146)

These realisations can be likened to the epiphany of Roquentin in *Nausea* when he reads the article about the rape and murder of Lucienne and comments: “Her body still exists, her bruised flesh. *She* no longer exists” (146). The narrator adopts Tyler’s philosophy when he uses the threat of death to force a young man called Raymond to leave his job at the “all-night Korner mart” in order to return to veterinary school and become what he originally wanted to be (151). After he has been terrified and enlightened to death, the narrator concludes that Raymond will be much more appreciative of his existence and prepared to live authentically: “tomorrow will be the most beautiful day of your entire life” (155). Perhaps the extremity of this act leads the narrator to question what he is becoming and realise, in the following chapter, the terrifying truth that he and Tyler are the same person.

By this point in the novel, Tyler’s Project Mayhem is becoming increasingly disturbing. To begin with, Tyler’s attempts to subvert the discourses of mainstream society had seemed mischievously comic and reasonably harmless to the narrator. These include the splicing of pornography into family feature films, the manufacture of soap from liposuctioned human fat, and the hospitality terrorism, all of which, though grotesque and provocative, never endanger anyone’s life. Similarly, the violence of fight club is consensual. However, Project Mayhem moves into territory which pushes the boundaries of Palahniuk’s combination of the comic and the disturbing even further.

Tyler’s intentions for the project are far from coherent, and draw from numerous contradictory sources. Project Mayhem is described as a “great war of the spirit” and a “great revolution against the culture” for a generation of men without a “great war” or a “great depression” in which to define themselves (149). This generation is characterised as enslaved to advertising and the discourses of consumer culture; hence they work “in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don’t really need” (149). Tyler senses that this generation “want[s] to give their lives to something” (149). As a cultural revolution, the

Project advances a pseudo-Marxist critique of capitalism that intends to “call a strike and everyone refuses to work until we redistribute the wealth of the world” (149). Tyler’s rhetoric recalls the doomed idealism surrounding numerous totalitarian historical movements of the twentieth century, to the extent that his claims—which evoke language that once held great power and commanded self-sacrifice—are undercut by the irony produced by their familiarity and naivety. As an extension of the hyper-masculinity of fight club, Tyler advocates a return to a primitive society without currency or technology, a tribal hunter-gatherer existence among the re-appropriated relics of the late twentieth century urban landscape:

You’ll hunt elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center [...] We’ll paint the skyscrapers with huge totem faces and goblin tikis, and every evening what’s left of mankind will retreat to empty zoos and lock itself in cages as protection against bears and big cats and wolves that pace and watch us from outside the cage bars at night. (124)

Tyler feels this would be a more authentic existence for the men of his generation than one in the service industry or trapped in an office job.

Tyler’s philosophy is too idealistic and unfocused, however, and it swiftly produces a fascist organisation which ends up negating many of its initial goals. For example, the project initially intended to free individuals from the conformist grip of capitalist discourse and teach “each man in the project that he had the power to control history” (122), but, in an Orwellian twist, then ends up “enslaving” its members to show them “freedom”, and using fear to “show them courage” (149). The members are required to wear black and not ask questions; they are turned into “space monkeys” who perform instructions with robotic obedience (12). When the narrator chooses to work against Tyler—after the death of Bob at the hands of the police during a botched Project Mayhem mission—he is

obviously acting from a different philosophical point of view. Sartre's theory of the "project of being-God" underpins this split in ideological motivation.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre posits that existing authentically means overcoming bad faith and choosing a life with a project which "has freedom for its foundation and its goal", rather than the futile "project of being-God" (602). Although Sartre was an atheist, he recognised that theism, as a human construction, told a truth about humanity: that the longing for God signifies a state which man wishes to attain but cannot (Detmer 130). Sartre suggests that man longs for "the ideal of a consciousness which would be the foundation of its own being-in-itself by the pure consciousness which it would have of itself" (*Being and Nothingness* 587). This is a desire for completion and arrival, to become something that is what it is: something justified and necessary. Yet this desire is paradoxical and doomed to failure, an ambition reflected in the contradictory nature of God, because "being free is incompatible with having a fixed essence of any kind, let alone that of perfection" (Detmer 130). To seek to become God is to live inauthentically in bad faith. To overcome this flaw of the human condition, to find salvation so to speak, requires "a self-recovery of being" towards "authenticity" by making freedom the basis of one's project instead of trying to be God (*Being and Nothingness* 94, n.9).

As previously stated, Tyler is directly likened, at several points in the novel, to God and Christ. He begins the novel as a saviour figure, but ends up becoming a patriarchal megalomaniac. In the opening chapter Tyler is holding the narrator hostage in a building about to explode. The narrator is positioned as an evangelist: "Where would Jesus be if no one had written the gospels? [...] you want to be a legend, Tyler, man, I'll make you a legend" (15), while Tyler states: "We won't really die [...] This isn't really death [...] We'll be legend. We won't grow old" (11). These fanatical delusions of grandeur, immortality, and martyrdom, emphasise how far Tyler has deviated from his initial philosophy; he has moved from drawing inspiration from the pain and transience of a mortal existence to

trying to conquer and overcome death itself. Such delusion is enforced by the reference to “Ozymandias, king of kings” just before the novel’s climax (201), alluding to Percy Shelley’s 1818 sonnet which describes a decaying monument to emphasise the inevitable decline of even the mightiest rulers and their kingdoms.

A scene early in the novel illustrates Tyler’s awareness of this transience. When the narrator first meets him on a nudist beach, Tyler has created a sculpture out of driftwood which casts a “shadow of a giant hand” that is “perfect” only when the sun is at a certain point, demonstrating that “A moment was the most you could ever expect from perfection” (33). In contrast to Ozymandias’ monument in Shelley’s sonnet— which is inscribed with the words “Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!” (line 11), Tyler’s sculpture is created in full awareness of the fact that “Nothing is static” (49). Furthermore, Tyler’s actions on the beach enact the ideas of Roquentin and Anny’s discussion of “perfect moments” near the end of *Nausea*. Anny explains to Roquentin that “perfect moments” are created out of “privileged situations”, but it is the individual’s responsibility or “duty” to complete the transformation as the situation provides only “the raw material” which still “has to be treated” (*Nausea* 212). Tyler’s use of the “raw material” of the beach to construct his own “perfect moment” demonstrates the logic of the conversation of Sartre’s characters.

Why is it then, that, despite his awareness of the transience of perfection and life itself, Tyler ends up chasing the futile “project of being-God”, aspiring to become “Tyler Durden the Great and Powerful” (199), an Ozymandias in his own right? Camus’ 1951 book-length essay *The Rebel* elucidates the existential motivation behind Tyler’s Project Mayhem, as well as its eventual failure. The ideas in this essay were first drafted in 1943-1944 when Camus was under the inspiration of having read Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (Aronson 118). Camus’ essay presents an account of several different ideological and historical approaches to revolt and revolution, such as that of the Marquis de Sade,

Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, the Nazis, and the Bolsheviks. The essay critiques the revolutionary mindset, which Camus sees as too overreaching in its desire to transform the world, as well as an approach prone to embrace violence and murder as a means to achieve such a transformation: “Revolution [...] is only a limitless metaphysical crusade” (79). Instead, Camus presents the “man in revolt” as a preferable way to challenge injustice by continually contesting power without losing sight of values such as solidarity and the sanctity of human life. In the Cold War context in which it was published, *The Rebel* functioned as a critique of communism as a revolutionary force, and the novel acted as a catalyst for the irreparable rupture in the relationship between Camus and Sartre, who declared himself an intellectual politically committed to the communist cause in 1952 (Aronson 117).

As a postwar attempt to understand, in part, the destructive excesses of fascism, Camus’ exploration of how “an act of rebellion [...] forgets its purpose and plunges into a mire of tyranny and servitude” (28) is equally applicable to the failure of the neo-fascist Project Mayhem. Camus suggests that all rebellion is, at its metaphysical core, a revolt against the absurdity of the world and the human condition, an attempt to supplant God and overcome absurdity by wielding power brutally in an attempt to stamp control on the world. Camus suggests the metaphysical rebel is not an atheist; instead, he “defies more than he denies” (31) and attempts to talk to God as an equal. Tyler demonstrates this in his attempt to get “God’s attention for being bad” (141), and yet he succumbs to the desire to deify man by creating a naturalistic, post-historic utopia. Thus, if we apply Camus’ angle, *Fight Club*’s numerous appropriations and perversions of Christian material demonstrate a blasphemy which “is reverent, since every blasphemy is a participation in holiness” (*The Rebel* 50). Tyler starts out as a liberator and ends up becoming the oppressor, for, as Camus states, “The slave starts by begging for justice and ends up wanting to wear the crown” (31).

Camus' analysis of de Sade in *The Rebel* bears some striking similarities to Palahniuk's characterisation of Tyler Durden. Camus suggests that, as a prisoner disillusioned with the violence of the state, de Sade repudiated "man and his morality, because God repudiates them both" (34), and, as a proponent of "absolute liberty", de Sade felt that: "nature has need of crime, that it must destroy in order to create, and that thus we help it to create from the moment that we embark on self-destruction" (34). These qualities are also embraced and advocated by Tyler, who declares "self-destruction is the answer" and "the lower you fall, the higher you'll fly" (*Fight Club* 49, 141). Camus concludes that de Sade's

contestable merit lies in having demonstrated, with the unhappy perspicacity of accumulated rage, the extreme consequences of a rebel's logic—at least when it forgets its true origins. These consequences are a hermetic totalitarianism, universal crime, an aristocracy of cynicism, and the desire for an apocalypse. (42)

These are also the intended consequences of Tyler's logic: his desire to use mayhem and anarchy to "take control of the world" and "blast the world free of history" (122, 124). When Tyler's philosophy changes from an existential quest into fascism and nihilism, it is because he has forgotten his "true origins", that which "Camus regarded as the sole saving insight: that life is absurd, and even though we must rebel, nothing can create order or remove death's sting" (Aronson 120).

The narrator, on the other hand, is still searching for freedom, a pursuit in which Tyler has become an obstacle, as well as a threat to Marla, who has developed into a love interest for the narrator. Kavaddo suggests that "fight club never saves the narrator, as he says it does early in the novel; instead, Marla does" (8). In chapter 27 the narrator contemplates killing himself, but decides not to as he must "save" Marla (193). Thus, his own life is saved by the desire to save the life of another, indicating a move towards community and human affection. Similarly, in the penultimate chapter the realisation that Marla and the support

group members are willing to risk their lives trying to save him causes the narrator to experience an “epiphany moment” (204). Palahniuk himself has asserted: “all my books are about a lonely person looking for some way to connect with other people”, as well as stating “I’m not a nihilist. I’m a romantic” (qtd. in Kavadlo 6, 5).

Palahniuk does not, however, follow the “romantic” convention of concluding his novel with an amorous union between Marla and the narrator. Instead, the narrator shoots himself in the head in order to commit suicide and get rid of Tyler. The bullet misses his brain and tears through his cheek, however, and in the final chapter he wakes up in a hospital, which is characterised as “heaven” (206). Palahniuk leaves it ambiguous as to whether the narrator has succeeded in banishing Tyler from his mind. Although he expresses a desire to reconnect with Marla, the narrator is hesitant to leave the hospital as some members of the staff still refer to him as “Mr. Durden” and tell him: “We look forward to getting you back” (208). Camus’ framework of the existential quest in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, which states “At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery” (11), is subverted by Palahniuk so that the narrator experiences both consequences to the extent that each negates the other: he does not really commit suicide and die, and neither does he properly recover within the timeframe of the novel.

The narrator has, however, come to some conclusions about existence, expressed in a conversation with “God”, who is probably a doctor in the hospital (207). This scene parallels the discussion between Meursault and the prison chaplain at the end of Camus’ *The Outsider*. The chaplain, as a representative of faith, tries to persuade Meursault to repent his sins and accept divine salvation, which Meursault rejects outright. Instead, he declares his acceptance of the world with its meaningless absurdity and “benign indifference” (117), telling the prison chaplain: “I’d done this and I hadn’t done that. I hadn’t done one thing whereas I had done another. So what?” (115). Correspondingly, in *Fight Club* God tries to tell the narrator that “each of us is a sacred, unique snowflake of

special unique specialness”, to which the narrator says “God’s got this all wrong”. Instead, he articulates the same acquiescence as Meursault to the lack of inherent meaning behind existence, asserting that “we just are and what happens just happens” (207).

The narrator’s rejection of divine sentimentality closely mirrors a comment by Patrick Bateman during his conversation with Jean in the chapter “End of the 80s”, where he says “You know how they say no two snowflakes are ever alike? [...] Well I don’t think that’s true. I think a lot of snowflakes are alike...and I think a lot of people are alike too” (*American Psycho* 363). Bateman later thinks, while considering “the question *Why not end up with [Jean]?*” (364), “everyone is interchangeable anyway [...] it doesn’t really matter” (365). The interchangeability of people—a reoccurring theme in *American Psycho*—is also expressed by Meursault at the end of *The Outsider* when he tells the chaplain:

what did his God or the lives people chose or the destinies they selected matter to me, when one and the same destiny was to select me and thousands of millions of other privileged people [...] What did it matter that Raymond was just as much my mate as Celeste who was worth more than him? What did it matter that Marie now had a new Meursault to kiss? (115-16)

All three protagonists express an atheistic rejection of the notion that their individual selves possess inherent meaning or “unique specialness”, and for the narrator of *Fight Club* this interchangeability has taken a Gothic twist in that he is potentially still transposable with Tyler Durden—another identity buried within his psyche. The possibility of redemption through the Other remains, however, because Marla “know[s] the difference” between the narrator and Tyler (205). Hence, while Patrick is seemingly left in a state of “NO EXIT”, the ending of *Fight Club* is slightly more optimistic. This optimism is consistent with Camus’ ideal of the need for acceptance of the absurd; however, both Ellis and Palahniuk destabilise Sartre’s ideal of the individual with a project which “has freedom

for its foundation and its goal” (*Being and Nothingness* 602). Within the postmodern satire of *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, such a project appears problematic and somewhat naive.

Robert Bennett comments that *Fight Club* engages “existential themes [...] with a sense of postmodern ironic detachment that veers dangerously close to existentialist self-parody” (77-78), an astute observation equally applicable to *American Psycho*. In the conclusion of this thesis we will return to the question of how seriously the reader is to take the engagement of *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* with existential thought, and to what extent the satirical and postmodern style of these novels undermines or destabilises the seriousness of their philosophical content. But first, I will demonstrate the necessity of an existential framework for understanding two aspects of these contemporary texts that constitute a significant departure from *Nausea* and *The Outsider*, their graphic violence and use of Gothic conventions. The violent content of these novels has been a source of controversy and a thorny component for critics to explain. In the next chapter I argue that the existential agenda underlying the violence of *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* suggests the engagement of these texts with existential philosophy amounts to more than mere “self-parody”.

Chapter Three

Violence

Violence serves a variety of existential functions in *Nausea* and *The Outsider*. Roquentin's perception of the world—particularly when it is distorted by the influence of Nausea—has an atmosphere of menace in which existence itself becomes threatening. Violence bubbles latently beneath the surface of human freedom in *Nausea*; for example, Roquentin considers how easy it would be for him to “plunge [his] cheese-knife into the Autodidact's eye”, an action that would cause the people around him to “trample on [him] and kick [his] teeth in” (*Nausea* 177). On another occasion he deliberately cuts the palm of his hand to illustrate his freedom and superfluity (145). Roquentin's feverish imagination is often visited by disturbing surrealist images, such as those caused by the rape and murder of a little girl he reads about in the newspaper (146), or his “vision” of a “bleeding” dead body lying amid the window display of a butcher's shop (111). Catherine Brosman suggests that “many readers” find *Nausea* “morbid and disgusting” (127), yet, as these examples attest, the violence of the novel is often hallucinatory or marginal to the action depicted, and is included by Sartre to evoke an atmosphere of danger that rarely manifests itself in a strictly concrete sense.

In *The Outsider*, the turning point of the plot is Meursault's murder of an Arab man. This event is dramatic—Camus' vividly describes Meursault's perception and psychological state as he commits the act, but the violence itself is understated; the Arab man's death is immediate after the first gunshot, there is no screaming or blood, and the bullets that follow sink into the “lifeless body [...] without leaving a mark” (60). This event has a violent build-up beginning with Raymond's rough treatment of his mistress, leading to the fight with the Arabs on the beach in which Raymond is cut by a knife (55). Camus uses

violence to highlight the absurd rather than to criticise violence in itself; Brosman observes that “Meursault had no murderous intentions whatsoever and did not wish to be involved in Raymond’s quarrel with the Arabs, but, small incidents leading to others, finally a man dies, and the chain of consequences is irreversible” (154). The second half of the novel concerns the violence of the state toward Meursault, who is sentenced to death for the murder of the Arab; in keeping with his absurdist agenda, however, “Camus makes it clear that it is Meursault’s attitude, not the act itself, that entails the maximum sentence” (154). Like Sartre’s use of violent content in *Nausea*, Camus includes bloodshed to illustrate existential ideas.

Graphic and brutal violence features far more prominently in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* than in *Nausea* and *The Outsider*, and this content has given each of these contemporary texts a degree of notoriety. In his discussion of Fincher’s cinematic adaptation of Palahniuk’s novel, Henry Giroux says “*Fight Club* functions less as a critique of capitalism than as a defence of authoritarian masculinity wedded to the immediacy of pleasure sustained through violence and abuse” (15), a sentiment similar to the National Organisation for Women’s verdict on Ellis’ novel: “the publication of *American Psycho* is socially irresponsible and legitimises inhuman and savage violence masquerading as sexuality” (qtd. in Freccero 50). These responses, which, admittedly, are among the most unsympathetic, draw on a subjective moral standard to judge whether the violence of each book is “socially responsible”, and not surprisingly, given the narrowness of this critical approach, find them lacking. Alternatively, I argue that this controversial component arises necessarily from the existential framework of each novel. I have already suggested that Ellis and Palahniuk link violence, thematically, with authenticity, the eruption of repressed primal instincts, and a fascination with the contrast of life and death, and these ideas are clarified by engaging the texts through the framework of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir’s theories of existential sadism. I argue that the existential implications of the violent content

of these texts reflect the concerns of the historical and social context in which they were written, such as the gender politics of the crisis of masculinity and the desensitisation of violence within a culture of excess. In this way the existential crisis of individual characters is extended to wider American society, deepening the social satire that animates each novel.

In his article “Muscular Existentialism in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*”, Andrew Ng touches briefly on Sartre’s theory of sadism as a way of understanding the narrator’s engagement with violence as “existential sadism” (119). Sartre discusses sadism within a section of *Being and Nothingness* regarding the difficulty of knowing and, in turn, being recognised by “the Other”. He suggests this alienation affects human sexuality, because “I desire him (or her) as he is” but just as “he is an Other for me” so “I am an Other for him” (406). Sartre views sadism as “an effort to incarnate the Other through violence”, and the sadist as someone who “wants to make [the Other’s consciousness] present by treating the Other as an instrument [so that] he makes it present in pain” (421). This is an attempt, by the sadist, to appropriate the Other’s freedom through the flesh. This attempt is ultimately a “blind alley”, however, doomed to fail, as the sadist refuses his own flesh by reducing himself to “an instrument for giving pain”, and thus his grasp of the Other’s freedom is but an “illusion” (421). The sadist does not therefore obtain transcendence; instead, Sartre concludes, the body of the Other “is *there*, and it is there for *nothing*” (426).

Ng relates sadism to the narrator’s appropriation of the suffering of the flesh he relishes during his time as a “tourist” in the support groups (*Fight Club* 24), though a number of other incidents in the novel also suggest a form of “existential sadism” (Ng 119). Sartre maintains that the sadist enjoys mounting resistance on the freedom of the Other, forcing “this freedom freely to identify itself with the tortured flesh” (*Being and Nothingness* 425). Thus, the sadist feels pleasure and empowerment by positioning himself

as “the cause” of the moment when the Other determines that the pain has become unbearable by crying out or begging for mercy (425). This moment of abjection is “a spontaneous production, a response to a situation; it manifests human-reality” (425). This logic is apparent in *Fight Club*, where the “third rule” is that “when someone says stop, or goes limp, even if he’s just faking it, the fight is over” (*Fight Club* 49). In the passage where the narrator fights a young man with an “angel’s face” he is “in the mood to destroy something beautiful” (122). He attempts to bludgeon the man’s flesh and freedom as a way of releasing his anger at the world and simulating empowerment, but the next day he still feels “like crap and not relaxed at all. I didn’t get any kind of buzz” (123). He has reached the end of the “blind alley” of *Fight Club*, having become “an instrument for giving pain”. In brutalising the Other until “the skin was pounded thin across his cheekbones and turned black” the narrator reaches a point where he realises that the abject body before him is “there for nothing” (*Fight Club* 124; *Being and Nothingness* 426).

Robert Taylor’s article “The SEXpressive S” (1953) comparing the treatment of sex in the works of Sartre and de Sade states that “Sartre expresses the unity of torturer and tortured throughout his works” (21). Taylor draws attention to a segment of Sartre’s essay *Baudelaire* (1947)—a discussion of the nineteenth century French poet—to elucidate this idea. There, reacting to a poem from *The Flowers of Evil* (1857) titled “L’Héautontimorouménos”, Sartre writes:

Thus the tortures which he inflicted on himself simulated possession. They tended to make flesh—his own flesh—grow beneath his fingers so that in the very throes of its sufferings it would recognise that it was his flesh. To cause suffering was just as much a form of possession and creation as destruction. (26)

This logic finds a clear echo in *Fight Club* where incarnation through violence, or the recognition of the flesh through pain, is likened to being “saved” (51). Palahniuk’s novel repackages this logic into pithy catchphrases, such as “Maybe self-destruction is the

answer” or “only through destroying myself can I discover the greater power of my spirit” (49, 110), and enacts it through symbolic scenes like the acid burn kiss in chapter nine which awakens the narrator to the present and mortality through pain. Baudelaire’s poem uses a Greek word as its title, which translates to “that which punishes itself” (*Flowers of Evil* 368), and contains the lines “I am the cheek, I am the slap / I am the limbs, I am the rack, / The prisoner, the torturer!” (lines 22-24). Similarly, *Fight Club* contains numerous incidents of self-harm, both overt, such as the narrator punching himself in the face to extort money from his boss, and those we realise retrospectively once we know Tyler and the narrator are the same person, such as the kiss scene, which has to have been self-administered. Taylor sees the wielding of man’s powers of creation and destruction as an existential assertion that “Feeble as he is, man can thus work a personal effect upon the universe, and so in part rise to the station of a god” (22), an idea from *Being and Nothingness* that I have already discussed in relation to *Fight Club*.

Patrick Bateman’s violence in *American Psycho* is overtly sadistic and far more disturbing than that of *Fight Club* because none of it is consensual. His attacks are initially directed against those who are radically Other to him, beginning with the homeless black man, Al, whose mutilation is described in a vacant monotone. Prior to the attack Patrick takes out some money from an automated teller, as it makes him feel “better having an even five hundred in my wallet” (123), and before he finds Al he is whistled at by “a couple of skinny faggots” and offered “crack” by some “Black guys” (123). These details suggest that Patrick’s attack on Al stems from anxieties over his own status, as well as a fear of contamination by the Other. Despite being destitute and black, and thus both a class and racial Other, Al is given another layer of Otherness when Patrick tells him to “stop crying like some sort of *faggot*” (125-26), foreshadowing the next attack on an “old queer” walking his dog in the park (157). Sartre states that “As for the type of incarnation which sadism would like to realise, this is precisely what is called *Obscene*”, before convolutedly

defining “the obscene” as a state of being “ungraceful” where the victim’s body “adopts postures which entirely strip it of its acts and which reveal the inertia of the flesh” (*Being and Nothingness* 421, 423). This incarnation is evident when Patrick attacks Al’s dog, breaking its legs so that they then stick “up in the air at an obscene, satisfying angle” (127). After mutilating Al, Patrick feels “heady, ravenous”, more alive, and immerses himself further in the Other by going to McDonalds as it is “somewhere Al would go”. This “high slowly dissolves’, however, and everything feels “horribly anticlimatic” (127), recalling the narrator’s failure to get “any kind of buzz” when he beats “angel face” in *Fight Club* (123). Patrick’s attack on Al reveals his strange mixture of fear and anger towards, fascination with, and repulsion for the Other, conflicted feelings also evident in his attacks on women.

The last of these torture-mutilation-murders is also, perhaps, the most infamous, as it contains the appallingly imaginative rat sequence. Sartre’s ideas about the sadist’s appropriation of freedom are particularly evident here; Patrick “pretends to let [the girl] escape” to increase his pleasure on recapturing her (314), and emphasises that “no matter what other choice she might have made [...] all this would have happened anyway. *I would have found her*. That is the way the earth works” (315). In this way he tries to make his possession of her freedom complete and ascribe himself a God-like omnipotence. However, as the death of his victim draws near, Patrick “can already tell it’s going to be a characteristically useless, senseless death” (316). Sartre suggests that pursuing the death of the Other in hatred

implies a fundamental resignation; the for-itself abandons its claim to realise any union with the Other; it gives up using the Other as an instrument to recover its own being-in-itself. It wishes simply to rediscover a freedom without factual limits; that is, to get rid of its own inapprehensible being-as-object-for-the-Other and to abolish its dimension of alienation. This is equivalent to projecting the realization of a world in which the Other does not exist. (*Being and Nothingness* 386)

The suppression, or killing, of an Other, as a representative of all Others, implies an “explicit recognition that the Other has existed”, as well as constituting the attacker as an “irremediable object” and thus trapping the self in alienation. Consequently, “the triumph of hate is in its very upsurge transformed into failure. Hate does not enable us to get out of the circle. It simply represents the final attempt, the attempt of despair”, leaving the self with only the option of re-entering “the circle” (388). This is the pattern Patrick follows throughout *American Psycho*, a novel which itself forms a circle—what Young calls a “closed system” (“Beast” 93)—with its first and last lines, ending “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT” (384). Killing cannot help Patrick through his existential crisis.

The works of the Marquis de Sade, whose name was appropriated to coin the term “sadism”, can be considered a textual precedent for the violence of Patrick Bateman, although Ellis claimed in 1994 “still [not to have] read much of Sade” (Amerika). The aforementioned rat sequence in *American Psycho* is described by Julian Murphet as “one of the more nauseating and despicable images in literature since de Sade, and seems out of context merely to indulge in the worst kind of misogynistic voyeurism and disgust for the female body” (66). De Sade’s depiction of violent sexuality, libertinism, and the transgressing of societal taboos in his works written toward the end of the eighteenth century, such as *One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* and *Justine*, earned him an infamy not unlike that of Ellis in the wake of the publication of *American Psycho*. Of particular interest to this thesis is Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist treatment of de Sade in her essay “Must We Burn Sade?” (1951), a reading which is surprisingly sympathetic considering her seminal position in the canon of feminist theory and the empowerment of women and de Sade’s in that of purported literary misogyny. Unlike Camus’ account of de Sade, in *The Rebel*, as a precursor to the twentieth century fascist mindset, de Beauvoir’s essay—published shortly after Camus’—finds de Sade’s merit to be the challenge he poses to his readers.

There is a strong resonance of Sartre's theory of existential sadism in de Beauvoir's reading, which finds the root of de Sade's violent sexuality to be a reaction to his alienation from other people and an interest in probing the conflict between consciousness and flesh. She proposes that "Cut off from others, [de Sade] was haunted by their inaccessible presence" (34), and thus compensated "for separateness by deliberate tyranny" (22). Although he renounced the notion of "universal morality" and dismissed law and society as mere constructs of the state (48), de Beauvoir finds that de Sade engages, in his own extreme or "outrageous" fashion, with the difficulty of the conflicting aspirations of the human condition to both universality and individuality (4-5). However, in resigning himself to the conclusion that the Other is unknowable, and choosing crime and cruelty as the means of engaging, concretely, with his own individual existence, that existence "becomes absurd", and in accordance with Sartre's theory: "the tyrant who tries to assert himself by such violence, merely discovers his own nothingness" (63). De Beauvoir concludes that we must not burn de Sade because "his ability to disturb us [...] forces us to re-examine thoroughly the basic problem which haunts our age in different forms: the true relation of man to man" (64).

Ellis' novel also disturbs us, and perhaps it does so because Patrick Bateman resembles, in a number of ways, the Marquis de Sade. Painfully isolated and ineffectual in his public life, Patrick uses graphically described sadism, indiscernible as either textual reality or fantasy, as a means of engaging the Other and feeling empowered in his own existence. De Beauvoir points out that "in his books [de Sade] invents a lot more than he reveals about himself" (19), and in this sense Patrick resembles de Sade the author more than his monstrous creations, because as Patrick is such an unreliable narrator, we are unable to gauge the "reality" of his testimony, just as it would be an error to conflate de Sade, the man, entirely with his words. De Beauvoir feels that "It was not murder that fulfilled Sade's erotic nature: it was literature", and for de Sade and Patrick the creative

outlet of the imagination provides the flight they both crave “from space, time, prison, the police, the void of absence, opaque presences, the conflicts of existence, death, life, and all contradictions” (33): a temporary remedy to the existential dilemma.

De Beauvoir criticises de Sade, as an author, for failing “to confront himself” and instead being content “with projecting his fantasies” (37), in effect, writing self-indulgently rather than for his reader. As such, she describes his work as “having the unreality, the false precision, and the monotony of schizophrenic reveries” (37), an effect Ellis deliberately evokes to construct the first person account of an unreliable, and probably mentally ill, Sadean narrator. Like Ellis, who adopts the discourses of consumer culture to undermine them and reveal “the boring, mundane heart of post-war consumer capitalism” (Young, “Beast” 104), so too does de Sade utilise the impact of parody, which de Beauvoir considers his “favourite form”, in order to criticise what he perceived to be the bourgeois hypocrisy of his class and time (35). The following passage from de Beauvoir’s description of de Sade’s writing is equally applicable to Ellis’ crafting of Patrick’s monologue:

His very form tends to disconcert us. He speaks in a monotonous, embarrassed tone, and we begin to get bored, when all at once the dull greyness is lit up with the glaring brilliance of some bitter, sardonic truth. It is then that Sade’s style, in its gaiety, its violence, and its arrogant rawness, proves to be that of a great writer.

(36)

Palahniuk’s engagement with sadism and the taboo has also been compared to that of de Sade. Andrew Slade notes the reoccurrence in Palahniuk’s fiction of characters who gain pleasure “by risking extreme pain”, thereby finding an “authentic pleasure that cannot be gained through the daily simulacra of pleasure packaged and sold to us” (65). In this way sadism becomes a means of countering the characters’ frustration with the numbing banality of consumer culture. Although Slade finds Palahniuk to be “a writer in the model of Sade”, he concludes that each author ties up his stories in fundamentally different ways.

While de Sade “resolves his search for greater freedom and authenticity through an increase of debauchery and crime”, Palahniuk uses romance and humour as a “solution to violence” (66). In this sense Ellis is more like de Sade than Palahniuk, for while all three authors take their characters to very dark and violent places, Ellis and de Sade usually leave them there, whereas Palahniuk endeavours to get them out. This argument can be detected in *Fight Club* in that Tyler Durden, the Sadean character, is denied redemption and seemingly destroyed from the narrator’s psyche in order to make way for, we assume, an eventual romantic reunion between the narrator and Marla. This symbolic triumph of love over hate, virtue over vice, is nevertheless shadowed by doubt because of the ambiguities Palahniuk has woven into the novel’s final chapter.

De Beauvoir reads de Sade’s philosophy of libertinism as a radical expression of his individuality in the face of “stupid conformism” and “hypocritical resignation” to the “virtue” prescribed by the state (50). For de Sade, because “the concrete conditions under which individuals live are not homogenous, no universal morality is possible” (48), and for a man to submit to such morality is, in de Beauvoir’s existentialist terminology, to “renounce both his authenticity and his freedom” (50). Hence de Sade’s libertinism is a way of escaping the bad faith one adopts when one avoids the burden of personal responsibility by passively ascribing to the dominant morality of one’s society at a given point in time. De Beauvoir also emphasises that de Sade felt the morality of society represses “natural instinct, namely, the tyrannical will of the strong” and that “Laws, instead of correcting the primitive order of the world, only aggravate its injustice” (46).

This is a further way of understanding the existential motivation for the violence of *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*: as a way of asserting oneself as an individual by rebelling against the absurdity and conformity necessary to the discourses of consumer capitalism that dominate the milieu of both novels. In this way, the characters attempt to obtain authenticity and freedom by unleashing the repressed “primitive order” of violence.

Hence, the violence becomes a form of creation through destruction as the characters try to rehabilitate themselves as individuals and comprehend their humanity. Alex Blazer suggests Patrick Bateman feels the “urge to kill” as a way of reasserting control of himself in the face of the “existential chasm”, and that he “kills indiscriminately in order to feel for himself [and] shock some feeling, any feeling, into the hollow image that constitutes his very psychic identity” (“Chasms”). In this way he can “force reality—humanity, the traumatic—to usurp, if only for a tentative moment, the reign of the ubiquitous and empty imaginary”. In a similar fashion, Robert Bennett responds to Giroux’s criticism of *Fight Club* “as a clarion call for legitimating dehumanising forms of violence” by pointing out that the narrator and Tyler Durden both “turn to violence precisely because they find it humanising rather than dehumanising” (69). However, as I have already demonstrated, with reference to Sartre’s theory of sadism, both novels portray the attempt to obtain individuality and humanity through violence as a venture doomed to failure and nothingness.

A profound fear of and fascination with death underlies the existential motivation of the characters’ violent actions in both novels, and this paradoxical position is manifested in numerous instances of the denial and recognition of mortality. Marla, who claims that her “philosophy of life” is that “she can die at any moment” but that the “tragedy of her life is that she doesn’t” (108), is revealed to be a character who is, in spite of her morbidity and nihilistic posturing, deeply troubled by death. At various points in the novel she engages in suicidal or self-mutilating behaviour. She has a “collagen trust fund” kept in the freezer for future cosmetic operations, such as lip implants, because “As you get older, your lips pull inside your mouth” (91). In a scene in which the narrator helps Marla check herself for breast cancer, which she is worried she has, it seems that while she fears death, she is also

aware that it is a natural and necessary process, and that her fear is a reflection of a culture in which death has been made “something wrong”:

Marla tells me how in the wild you don't see old animals because as soon as they age, animals die. If they get sick or slow down, something stronger kills them. Animals aren't meant to get old [...] Old animals should be an unnatural exception. (103)

The narrator's pursuit of the perfect “nest” complete with all the necessary consumer products is his own way of trying to keep his consciousness that “nothing is static” at bay (44, 49), and Tyler's intention to martyr himself (and consequentially the narrator) to the Project Mayhem cause is his attempt to overcome death and obtain “eternal life” (11). Similarly, Patrick Bateman displays a paranoid obsession with maintaining a youthful appearance, a reflection of the discourses of consumer culture which perpetuate a fear of aging by positing youthful beauty as an ideal while providing the cosmetic products through which the individual can attempt to attain it. Patrick's excruciatingly detailed toilet routine in the chapter “Morning” demonstrates this absurdity in the extreme. Ruth Helyer notes that “Even [Patrick's] shampoo is chosen for its purported ability to make him look younger. His fear of aging is all encompassing to the point of delirium” (736). James R. Giles, in a chapter devoted to Ellis' novel in *The Spaces of Violence* (2006), asserts that “*American Psycho's* male characters fear death” and that their obsession with the latest consumer products “represents a desperate and doomed attempt on their part to believe that death cannot touch them” (169). Thus, as a symptom of this fear, Patrick “tries to defeat death by killing women and the poor, by attempting to take control of death in order to manipulate it to his own ends” (163). Such acts, “rooted in a kind of absurdist existentialism”, constitute his attempt to “protect himself from death by killing others” (169).

For the original existentialists, death was a fundamental truth the existential hero has to face and accept, and thus death is symbolically connected to authenticity and reality. Meursault begins his narration in *The Outsider* by saying “Mother died today” (9), and his existential quest begins when he visits her dead body and ends when he realises, at the novel’s conclusion, that he is happy despite the imminence of his own death by hanging, having been sentenced to death by the state for the murder of another man.⁸ In Palahniuk’s novel, *Fight Club* provides the disaffected male characters with a medium through which they can engage their physicality and confront their bodily decay, experiencing the adrenaline rush of touching death and authenticity from a distance. As the novel progresses, and the characters go further and further to achieve this buzz—such as the deliberate car crash in chapter 18, they tempt danger until, eventually, Bob is killed on a Project Mayhem mission, and this intrusion of the finality of death prompts the narrator to try to disband the organisation.

Tyler’s attempt to overcome death by martyring himself and gaining “eternal life” constitutes bad faith and the absurd in the same way as Bateman’s attempts to control death through murder (11). The violence of *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* can thus be read as a hyperbolic expression of the existential aspiration to the authenticity of death, but because both these endeavours are rooted in an attempt to sidestep death, and experience that authenticity vicariously, they are doomed to failure. Within the existentialist quest paradigm, the narrator of *Fight Club* comes close to succeeding when he, like Meursault, moves towards an acceptance that “We just are, and what happens just happens” (207), a realisation he reaches after the pseudo-death of his suicide attempt.

⁸ This punishment is in part due to Meursault’s quiet and unemotional acceptance of his mother’s death at the novel’s beginning. This twist adds an extra layer of absurdity, for, as Camus states in the novel’s 1955 afterword: “In our society any man who doesn’t cry at his mother’s funeral is liable to be condemned to death” (118).

If the violence of *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* breaks through the numbness and inertia of their characters' lives and thus functions as a portal to human feeling, then the extremity of the violence in these novels is also a comment on the violence of pop culture in the late 1980s and early 90s generally. In this way, these texts attempt to inject human feeling into *our* lives via the trauma of reading. In an article published in the *New York Times* on December 2nd 1990—at a time when *American Psycho* was written but as yet unpublished—Ellis discusses the desensitisation of his “basically unshockable” generation, “wooded with visions of violence, both fictive and real, since childhood” (H1). He elaborates:

If violence in film, literature and in some heavy-metal and rap music is so extreme it verges on the baroque, it may reflect the need to be terrified in a time when the sharpness of horror-film tricks seems blunted by repetition on the nightly news. But this audience *isn't* horrified by the endless slaughter, which is presented within the context of fantasy (“Robocop,” “Total recall,” “Die-Hard 2”) and the realm of the everyday. (H1, H37)

Thus, Ellis suggests that real violence and fictive violence anesthetise each other, that the public's ability to distinguish between the intended emotional impact of each form has become blurred, and, as a result of this “culture doesn't play the same role [for my generation] that it did for previous generations: to liberate, break boundaries, show the unshowable” (H1). In many ways this article anticipates the arrival of *American Psycho*, the extremity of which, Ellis claims, is a “metaphor” for “how desensitized our culture has become toward violence” (Cohen C13). The diversity of the range of positive and negative reactions to this metaphor, it seems Ellis did not anticipate, yet, as one commentator notes: “As for Ellis himself, he is getting what he called for (which is not what he wanted): a boundary, a barrier, a point at which people will fight back. But alas for us all that it has had to go so far” (Iannone 54).

The intertextual layers the violence of *American Psycho* draws upon are also a curious mixture of fictive and factual sources. On a textual level, Bateman's violence draws on his reading of the biographies of actual serial killers, such as Ted Bundy and Son of Sam, as well as his knowledge of fictional killers like Leatherface from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and the power drill sequence from *Body Double*. On a paratextual level, Ellis has stated that because of the difficulty he encountered in actually imagining the murders, he drew upon "criminology textbooks from the FBI" to create these hyper detailed sequences (Clarke 75). Similarly, *Fight Club* makes an implicit connection between the violence it depicts and the culture it reflects. The first fight between Tyler and the narrator—the inception of what will become fight club, is inspired by the westerns and cartoons of popular culture; the narrator hits Tyler in a "roundhouse [...] like in every cowboy movie we'd ever seen" and Tyler responds with a punch "just like a cartoon boxing glove on a spring on Saturday morning cartoons" (52-53). They continue the fight because, "like the cat and mouse in cartoons, we were still alive and wanted to see how far we could take this thing and still be alive" (53). By drawing this seminal moment of violence from media tailored to children, Palahniuk alludes to the inherent violence of contemporary popular culture and its effect on a generation "raised by television" (166). Both authors use the violence as a mirror, and the extremity of the violence is in keeping with each novel's commentary on the excesses of American culture in general.

In de Sade's libertinism, de Beauvoir sees the desperation of a "declining class" of aristocracy which "had once possessed concrete power, but which no longer retained any real hold on the world", trying to "revive symbolically, in the privacy of the bed chamber, the status for which they were nostalgic: that of the lone and sovereign feudal despot". In this way, the faded aristocrat could pursue the "illusion of power" through the "intoxication of tyranny" (8). This paradigm is mirrored in the violence of *American Psycho*

and *Fight Club* through Ellis and Palahniuk's probing of the existential implications of the decline of patriarchy and resulting crisis of masculinity. This loss of an inherited identity and traditional dominance in society can be seen to fuel, in part, the existential crises of the narrator/Tyler Durden, and Patrick Bateman. Hence, the violence of these characters can be read as a radical reaction against what the novels present as a modern society in which masculinity has become increasingly obsolete and in which culture has become feminised; the characters' hyper-masculinity can be seen as a desperate attempt to reclaim what they feel is their lost identity and birthright. Towards the end of their relationship Patrick's exasperated girlfriend asks him what he would like to be called, and he muses, with an ironic detachment that, nevertheless, reveals a lot of truth: "I want you to call me King. But I don't say this" (326-27).

In his article discussing the "Crisis of Postmodern Masculinity" in *American Psycho*, Mark Storey presents Patrick Bateman's identity as a construction drawn from a variety of modes of patriarchal language ("pornography, the media, fashion, commerce") which, when "taken to extremes", undermine their stability in order to show "the impossibility of their attempts to adapt to postmodernity" (59). In fashioning his identity from "clichéd masculine language", Patrick also undermines his own subjectivity, and "the inevitable cracks that appear in such an artificial identity allow us to peer into the void beneath" (62). Storey argues that Ellis presents normative masculinity in a state of intense fear of subjugation, evidenced by the extreme violence Patrick directs toward any group he perceives as "other", such as women, homosexuals, and ethnic minorities. This is because, as patriarchy declines, "the rise of the marginalised threatens his central position as hegemonic male" and so "to protect that position, he lashes out, attempting to eliminate the threat" (64).

In the context of a modern world characterised by instability and incessant change, Storey suggests Patrick's actions reveal a desperate and paranoid attempt to protect his

hegemony and ensure his survival by imagining “a world in which his masculine superiority can bring [‘perpetual change’] to a halt” (64). This idea is remarkably similar to Tyler Durden’s own reactionary desire to “blast the world free of history” and return society to its primitive origins in order to re-empower a regressive masculine identity based on physical prowess and violence (124). On an existential level, this fractured masculine self based on reactionary fear is a clear embodiment of bad faith. Furthermore, both depictions of this postmodern masculinity are complicated by the inclusion of an “unconscious feminine” in their protagonists (Storey 65), embodied in Patrick’s narcissistic obsession with his appearance and *Fight Club*’s narrator’s domestic nest building instincts. Both novels have also been noted for their implicit homoerotic subtexts.⁹ This all suggests that this reactionary hyper-masculinity is as much about a fear of the Other within oneself as it is about an external Other.

In reaction to the condemnation of *American Psycho*, Anne Bernays, herself the author of several novels, wrote a letter to the *New York Times* amid the pre-publication controversy surrounding the novel to point out that Ellis’ “sickening” depiction of violence towards women is an admirable attempt to reflect a disturbing social reality: the “continual physical abuse women suffer at the hands of men”. Bernays quotes from FBI statistics to give weight to her comment: “What’s all this fuss about violence toward women in a novel? It’s worse in real life”. “[T]he obligation of the novelist”, she suggests, “is to write the world as it is, not as he or she would like it to be” (A38). Mark Storey also perceives a self-reflective critique in Ellis’ novel, concluding “Normative masculinity’s objectification and fear of women’s bodies achieves its ultimate expression in Bateman’s fantasy of turning women’s bodies into meat” (66). Bernays and Storey both suggest a feminist subtext in *American Psycho*, and such an undercurrent is also detectable in *Fight*

⁹ For *American Psycho* see Murphet p. 82, and for *Fight Club* see “*Fight Club*’s Queer Representations” by Thomas Peele and “Muscular Existentialism” by Ng (120-21). In his afterword to the 2005 edition of *Fight Club* Palahniuk recalls a flight attendant who shared his theory with the author that the book was really “about gay men watching one another fuck in public steam-baths” (216).

Club, a book possessing what Kavaddo describes as: “masculine embodiment but closeted feminist critique”. He elaborates:

Through Palahniuk’s dramatic irony [...] readers have the opportunity to feel the redemptive powers of feminism, love, cooperation, harmony, and story telling, by inhabiting worlds were they are conspicuously, even absurdly, absent. (7)

The absence of these “redemptive powers” is even more absurd in Ellis’ novel, an aspect of his bleak satire that has the latent potential to affirm the reader in such powers via their negation. This technique is in contrast to the moral didacticism of pedagogy, a process undermined in both novels; consider the absurdity of Bateman’s fashion pep-talks and exhorting praise of banal pop music, or the descent of Tyler’s dogma and training camps for cultural revolution into cult-like fascism. Amidst so much collective delusion the subtext of each novel advocates the free thinking individual.

This chapter began by quoting critics who responded to the violence of *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* disapprovingly, having taken a self-righteous position in order to react against what they took to be brazen misogyny and the glorification of bloodshed. The violent component of these novels is more complicated than that. Peter Mathews, in his reading of *Fight Club*, finds a continual concern in the novel to warn readers “not to lose sight of the inevitable disjunction that exists between an ideology and its material effects”, and that “fascist mindsets” can operate hidden throughout the political spectrum. In explaining the attitudes of Tyler Durden, he elaborates:

Palahniuk shows how the transformation of a liberatory discourse into an ideological *doxa* ultimately alienates the very people it should be winning over. The recurring message of “thou shalt not” from progressive groups has the dangerous consequence of giving its opponents an inappropriate (but understandable) psychology of rebellion. (100)

This internal textual discourse can equally be applied to the condemnation *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* received from supposedly “progressive” critics. Judith Butler’s reading of “Must We Burn Sade?” suggests that de Beauvoir

makes it clear that feminism and philosophy ought not to participate in anti-intellectual trends, that it ought to distance itself from inquisitional practices, and that its intellectual task is to remain open to the difficulty and range of the human condition. (169)

In addition to “feminism and philosophy” we should also add “literary criticism”, and this is helpful advice for the literary critic to bear in mind when engaging with material that is, at first, quite morally provocative.

American Psycho and *Fight Club* explore the crisis of masculinity and the decline of patriarchy in a way that does not nostalgically suggest a return to a traditional model of macho male dominance in society as some reviews have suggested. Instead, they depict the symptoms that arise when masculinity is repressed, denied, or deemed obsolete—identity crisis, violence, and a misogynistic backlash against all that is feminine, prompting the reader to consider what the place of masculinity might be in the new millennium and how it might find expression. The subtext, then, is an existential quest for a new model of masculinity calibrated with the conditions of the modern world. By not resolving this quest, or resorting to didactic moralising, Ellis and Palahniuk place the onus on the reader, the burden of responsibility as it were, to engage in the quest for him/herself.

Chapter Four

The Gothic

The expression of existentialism at the end of the twentieth century in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* represents a significant stylistic shift from that of Sartre's *Nausea* and Camus' *The Outsider* in the mid twentieth century. As detailed in chapters one and two, while these two contemporary novels contain numerous close textual parallels with these "classic" existential novels, the influence of pop culture, satire, and postmodern twists modifies the ideas of the philosophy, shifting the focus towards an exploration of the symptoms of existential crisis instead of a linear path towards existential enlightenment or resolution. The graphic depiction of Sadean violence, discussed in the previous chapter, induces intense horror and trauma in the reader, darkening the tone of the novels as the characters attempt to destroy themselves, and others, as a way of redressing their anesthetised humanity and fragmented identities. Ellis and Palahniuk heighten these thematic concerns through their manipulation of the conventions and aesthetics of the Gothic.

If we consider that, broadly speaking, the Gothic arose in the eighteenth century as a reaction against the Enlightenment ideals of rationalism and neo-classical order—a rejection of objective absolutes to instead pursue an interest in immorality, the unknown, and the irrational—we find a similar motivation to that of the existential movement, which, catalysed by a specific historical context, took subjective experience as its focus in order to explore how the individual can find meaning in an absurd and meaningless world with no absolutes. Both arose from periods of historical trauma: the terrors and instabilities of the French Revolution feeding into the flourishing of the Gothic in the Romantic period, and existentialism originating from the uncertainties of European fascism in the 1930s and the destruction of the Second World War. Both movements

typically present ontological quests that seek answers in that which is typically deemed negative and transgressive.

Only a few previous studies have examined the use of the Gothic to explore existential concerns. In his introduction to *The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism* (1974), G. R. Thompson describes certain “high Gothic” works as embodiments of the

demonic-quest romance, in which a lonely, self-divided hero embarks on an insane pursuit of the Absolute. This self-destructive quest is metaphysical, mythic, religious, defining the hero’s dark or equivocal relationship to the universe. (2)

He goes on to describe the Gothic in existential terms as a genre which “deals with the tormented condition of a creature suspended between the extremes of faith and scepticism, beatitude and horror, being and nothingness” (3), alluding to Sartre’s 1943 philosophical treatise. Thompson claims that “dread”, whether “physical, psychological, or metaphysical” (3), is the central component of the Gothic romance, a form that attempts to “express a complex vision of the existential agony confronting man since the Age of Faith”, an “existential terror generated by a schism between a triumphantly secularised philosophy of evolving good and an abiding obsession with the Medieval conception of guilt-laden sin-ridden man” (5-6). During the Gothic protagonist’s “metaphysical” quest through a world which “withholds final revelation and illumination” the wonder of mystery and the thrill of terror are used to generate “an awful sense of the sublime in which sense of self is swallowed in immensity” (6, 4), a form of transcendence that aspires “upward toward God” (4). This reads as a precursor to the existential quest, a journey that begins, in Camus’ description in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, with man—the “alien”, “exile”, and “stranger”, who, within a “universe suddenly divested of lights” (4), yearns with “nostalgia for unity”, an “appetite for the absolute [that] illustrates the essential impulse for the human drama” (16). Similarly, the encounter with the Gothic sublime anticipates the existential confrontation with the absurdity of the void; while often presented as quite

terrifying experiences, both conventions instigate intimations of revelation and ontological meaning by disrupting normative perception.¹⁰

Expanding on Thompson's piece, Mark Hennelly argues, in his article "*Melmoth the Wanderer* and Gothic Existentialism" (1981), for "Gothicism as a prefiguration of modern existentialism" (669). Hennelly sees Charles Maturin's *Melmoth* (1820) as a literary precursor to the tradition of later novels by Dostoyevsky, Kafka, and Conrad, in that it has a "strong basis in existential thought" (665). He emphasises the cathartic effects of the Gothic, its function being to induce "a powerful emotional response in the reader (rather than a moral or intellectual one)" (666), suggesting that by becoming victims in the Gothic "drama of terror", and by experiencing and accepting their own "animal or emotional" side, readers can come closer to becoming "truly and existentially human" (666).

Barbara Waxman's article, "Postexistentialism in the Neo-Gothic Mode" (1992), also "note[s] the way existentialist themes have characterised Gothic fiction from its beginnings" (79), and she briefly comments upon elements of Gothic existentialism in *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Dracula* (1897). Her reading of Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) examines the complications of using a vampire as the protagonist who undertakes an existential quest, and the subsequent effects this has on the existential ideals of authenticity and moral responsibility. She explains that the novel's central character, Louis, is torn between human ethics and the laws of his nature as a vampire. Having made love the project of his hope for redemption, Louis finds that love fails, and resigns himself to the "constraints of his nature" as a vampire (88), a position Waxman describes as "posttextualist". She suggests that Rice's "postexistentialist addendum" emphasises "the naiveté of the existentialist assumption that one can obtain supreme comprehension and shape his/her own fate" (85).

¹⁰ Within Thompson's collection, Robert Hume's article "Exuberant Gloom, Existential Agony, and Heroic Despair: Three Varieties of Negative Romanticism" examines the existential thought of several canonical Gothic authors.

This is a thought-provoking argument, and one related to my own study, given Ellis and Palahniuk's own modifications of the existential quest paradigm. I find Waxman's notion of "postexistentialism" problematic and irrelevant to my own study, however, principally because of her application of a philosophy of human existence to the being of vampires. If vampires have a fixed essence, as Rice's novel and Waxman's article suggest, then, no matter how conflicted Louis may be, Sartre's idea that "existence precedes essence" is inapplicable, and, along with it, a significant portion of existential thought which thoroughly relies on this premise; as Sartre says in "Existentialism Is a Humanism", "if it is true that existence precedes essence, we can never explain our actions by reference to a given and immutable *human* nature" (emphasis added, 29). Thus, while a vampire might eventually have to "acknowledge [the] irreducible restrictions on his freedom", such as "the compulsion to kill" (Waxman 88), for a human to do the same would, in existential terms, be an act of bad faith as "there is no situation that fully commits you, one way or the other" (Sartre 39).

Furthermore, Sartre acknowledges in "Existentialism Is a Humanism" that there are always limitations imposed by an individual's situation and historical moment on his ability to freely choose a project, but that within those restrictions there always remains a basis of choice no matter how severely limited. Sartre tells the story of the range of choices facing one of his students during the Nazi occupation of France to demonstrate that "You are free, so choose" (33). Camus also acknowledges the limitations of choice, freedom, and responsibility; for example, he chooses Sisyphus as the quintessential absurd hero because he perseveres rather than despairs in the monotonous repetition of his existence. Thus, I find that neither Sartre nor Camus demonstrates the "naiveté" of what Waxman calls the "existentialist assumption that one can obtain supreme comprehension" over fate (85). Her article inadvertently highlights the dangers of conflating the fantasy realm of the Gothic too closely with existential thought.

In her article on existentialism in Ellis' debut, *Less Than Zero*, Nicki Sahlin briefly notes Ellis' use of a Gothic aesthetic to give an "air of menace" to his depiction of Los Angeles, evoking a sense of "destruction or disaster constantly on the horizon" (26). This Gothicised geographic environment contributes a claustrophobic "threat of entrapment" and "dread" to Clay's existential crisis, and she observes the appearance of the "familiar Gothic element" of "live burial" in Clay's nightmares (27). She suggests that the novel's frequent references to "darkness" and "disappearing" derive from Clay's confrontation with nothingness, which is symbolic of his fear of death as a state of absolute nonbeing (27). However, while Sahlin concludes that "the real horror for Clay is not Gothic [...] but existential" (27), she avoids probing further as to why Ellis chose to use the Gothic to convey the existential and how this combination works. In this study, my intention is not to suggest that the Gothic and existentialism are the same, but to consider why the expression of existential thought has taken a Gothic turn in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*.

The existential crisis suffered by *Nausea's* Roquentin pushes him to the brink of mental illness and psychosis, distancing him from normative reality and causing his autonomous self to come under the threat of dissolution within his experience of Nausea, a state of heightened contingency within which Sartre uses a dream-like surrealist aesthetic to evoke the somewhat menacing nature of a world overflowing with existents. Nevertheless, Roquentin's subjectivity is not fragmented or divided, and, in lieu of an inherent, essential identity, he realises a sense of himself as the originator of meaning, musing "when it comes to thought, it is I who continue it [...] I exist by what I think" (145), thus embodying Sartre's "existence precedes essence" maxim, an idea clarified in "Existentialism Is a Humanism" in which he states "man is nothing other than what he makes of himself" (22). In *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* this existential quest towards personal responsibility and the formation of one's own "essence" is complicated by the use of the Gothic double which adds an extra dimension to the existential ideas of authenticity, bad faith, and moral

choice. Despite traces of surrealist imagery reminiscent of *Nausea* in Ellis' novel, as two contemporary existential novels, *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* shift the expression of the philosophy towards a Gothic aesthetic in order to evoke the fears and uncertainties of the postmodern condition.

Both *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* have already been examined as Gothic texts. Ruth Helyer's article "Parodied to Death: The Postmodern Gothic of *American Psycho*" aptly summarizes Ellis' use of the capabilities of a Gothic "iconography [to give] expression to the repressed desires of the unconscious" (727). She examines the novel's use of Gothic motifs and themes, and notes that they are often used in an ironic and self-consciously postmodern way that borders on comic melodrama and parody, such as Patrick's line: "I'm running [...] screaming like a banshee, my coat open, flying out behind me like some sort of cape" (160). Her analysis of Patrick as a character who traverses, either literally or imaginatively, the boundaries of acceptable social behaviour emphasises the novel's concern with the fear of the Other (in terms of rich and poor, male and female, hetero- and homosexual), in the tradition of nineteenth-century Gothic classics like *Dracula*, *Dr Jekyll & Mr. Hyde* (1886), and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1881). In her article "I Am Marla's Monstrous Wound: *Fight Club* and The Gothic", Cynthia Kuhn asserts that Palahniuk's novel

offers a veritable catalogue of Gothic conventions: decrepit mansion, mysterious stranger, ancestral curse, clandestine behaviour, raging madness, eerie doubling, astonishing grotesqueries, and unavoidable monsters. (36)

Kuhn proposes that Palahniuk uses the Gothic to suggest that "to be a consumer is to be consumed" (39), noting the way Project Mayhem recycles human organic material into commodities. This raises a striking parallel to the way Patrick's obsession with consuming and possessing that which is scarce or unobtainable leads to his consumption of human bodies and the taking of life.

The Gothic trope of the double, or doppelgänger, traditionally represents a divide between the rational and passionate self, the civilised and the primitive, the human and the monstrous. In *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles* (2003), Linda Dryden writes:

If the traditional tale of Gothic horror tends to explore and expose our fear of agents outside ourselves and their capacity to harm us, then the fiction of duality usually reverses that anxiety, turning it upon ourselves to explore our horror of what we might be capable of. (38)

This summary, of an inner anxiety without an external object as the source of fear, calls to mind the “metaphysical fear” of existential angst, and it is from this fear that the split in the subject occurs in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, two novels in which duality and internal struggle are central concerns.

Consider the name of each novel as an indicator of the duality within. In Palahniuk’s title “Fight”, denoting the breakdown of communication and a shift toward hostility and violence, is paired with “Club”, evoking a community wherein individuals bond over a common interest and support one another; the novel itself shows how such an ostensible oxymoron can be reconciled. In Ellis’ title, “American”, which carries a vast array of different connotations internationally but for the citizens of the United States conjures freedom, patriotism, and the ideals of the country’s constitution, is paired with “Psycho”, which brings to mind Hitchcock’s 1960 film, *Psycho*, as well as the cultural phenomena of pathologically violent psychopaths generally. Patrick Bateman, who as a handsome and successful Wall Street banker is outwardly the embodiment of the American Dream, demonstrates how this duality can be present in a single individual, as in his private life he is, or at least aspires to be, a murderous and sadistic psychopath, his name being a nod to *Psycho*’s villain Norman Bates (Storey 72 n3). This schism between a character’s public and private personas is even more overt in *Fight Club*, where the narrator unwittingly unleashes an alter-ego to do the bidding of his repressed desires. In both novels, identity is a

fragmented and constantly shifting realm of subjectivity which draws on the Gothic trope of the double, and in particular, its use in two modern Gothic works from the late nineteenth century: *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson, and, to a lesser degree, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde.

In contrast to its earlier forms, the modern Gothic moves the geographical location of its scenes of horror from remote regions, from the traditional Gothic landscape of the isolated castle and ominous wilderness, to the contemporary urban environment: the labyrinth of streets and buildings that make up the modern city (Dryden 16). Social deprivation is particularly evident in this new setting, and the Gothic city becomes a “schismatic space that contains extremes of wealth and poverty, and where the poor are exploited by the rich, who are in turn deeply concerned by the anonymous and threatening nature of the metropolitan experience” (16). This concern reflects developments in literature at the time, such as the move from the general moral optimism of the realist movement to the pessimism of the “new” realist style, and the unflinching depictions of sordid poverty and precarious survival in the works of naturalists like Emile Zola. Naturalism was influenced by the dissemination of Darwinian evolutionary theory and the purported moral chaos and spiritual crisis of an increasingly secular world (5-6); the movement’s unsentimental portrayal of humanity led critic W. S. Lilly to comment in 1885 that naturalism “eliminates from man all but the ape and the tiger” (qtd. in Dryden 7).

In the public imagination city life was linked with degeneracy and the possibility of devolution, a fear that mankind might revert to a primitive state of being. This is evident in the naturalists’ interest in man’s “beast within”, the animal nature that underlies the ostensibly rational and moral individual (Dryden 9-10). In the prologue to his philosophical novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85) Nietzsche suggests that evolution is in constant fluctuation, noting the possibility of a lapse back to man’s bestial origins: “You

have made your way from worm to man, and much in you is still worm. Once you were apes, and even now man is more of an ape than any ape” (256). Gothic depictions of the primitive Other embody these fears, such as the unholy vampire in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* who poses the threat of a corrupting alien force to the civility and moral advancement of the Empire. The ominous aesthetic of the modern Gothic’s labyrinthine urban environment and representations of social degeneracy resonate throughout *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, but of particular interest to this thesis is the genre’s use of Gothic conventions to convey the repression and eruption of unrestrained hedonism. *Dracula* uses a Gothic monster to connect the fear of the primitive with sexuality and violence, but in the famous novellas Stevenson and Wilde wrote at this time this concern is conveyed using the Gothic motif of “the double”.

In 1885 the *Pall Mall Gazette* ran a series of articles by W. T. Stead which vividly detailed the presence of child prostitution in the East End of London. Titled “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon”, the coverage scandalised the public, exposing, as it did, the dual nature of the city with its extremes of poverty and wealth and the apparent exploitation of the poor by the rich, evident in its claim “that the demand for child prostitutes [...] was being stimulated by the sadistic tastes of a corrupt and callous class of well-to-do Victorian gentlemen” (Clemens 123). Stevenson had been mailed the first three of Stead’s articles by a friend, and he wrote *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* in the wake of the moral panic that followed their release (Clemens 123). First published in January 1886, Stevenson’s novella stresses the duplicity and moral degeneracy of the upper classes by relating the story of Dr Jekyll, a reputable gentleman who becomes disillusioned by the hypocrisy of his double life as a public figure of charitable benevolence while hiding a private life of secret pleasures and forbidden sins. By chemical experimentation, Jekyll manages to split his self into two, transforming himself into the brutish Mr Hyde in order to indulge his baser desires unfettered by his social standing and moral conscience. Jekyll

gradually loses his ability to control Hyde, and the story culminates in suicide, Jekyll ending his own life along with that of his doppelgänger.

The doubling motif is used in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* to explore the workings of repression and the unconscious mind, anticipating, in many ways, the developments in modern psychoanalytical theory by Freud and Jung. In her article on Stevenson's novella in her study of Gothic literature, *Return of the Repressed* (1999), Valdine Clemens states that Hyde is not only the "shadow self" of Jekyll, but also of "Victorian society in general" as he "embodies and exposes this society's moral deficiencies" (129), such as the self-righteous repression of sexuality and the moral hypocrisy of blind faith in man's upward progress amidst the chronic poverty and proliferation of crime and prostitution in the slums of industrial Britain. She points out the textual parallels between Stead's account of "the sadistic strain of upper-class male sexuality" in his "Maiden Tribute" articles and Jekyll/Hyde's nocturnal pleasures (136-37); Stevenson's depiction hints at, but never discloses, the true nature of these "undignified" acts (*Jekyll* 66).

The spectre of poverty and the duality of East/West London returned to the forefront of the public consciousness in 1888, with the Whitechapel murders in London's East End and the subsequent media sensation of "Jack the Ripper". These events, in which five "canonical victims"—all women prostitutes—were murdered and gruesomely mutilated by an unknown killer over the course of two months (Warwick xiv-xvi), terrified the public, and were frequently reported in the press with reference to *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, a stage adaptation of which was being performed at the time (Dryden 81-82). Hence, as Linda Dryden points out, horrific events in the real city of London were now being framed by the fictional narrative and Gothicised urban milieu of Stevenson's novella, an imagined city that was itself inspired by real events and social concerns, such as the "Maiden Tribute" scandal (52). Speculation over the identity of the mysterious "Jack the Ripper" raised numerous diverse suspects, from Malays and Jews (Dryden 47, 143), to doctors and

butchers, working class thugs and depraved aristocrats (Bloom, “Ripper” 101), the killer’s media persona encompassing a duality of its own.

The depravity, hypocrisy, and vices of the upper classes feature prominently in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which was serialised in 1890 before being revised and published in its final form in 1891. A number of parallels can be drawn between *Dorian Gray* and *American Psycho*, such as the fascination with an outer perfection that acts as a disguise for inner corruption. The anti-hero protagonists of both novels are gripped by narcissism and an intense fear of aging. Patrick Bateman’s tireless and tedious attention to material details, such as expensive designer clothes and objects, recalls the interest in luxurious possessions, aesthetic perfection, and surface artificiality within the Decadent movement, a style which is “infused” throughout Wilde’s novel (Dryden 114). The most pertinent aspect of Wilde’s novel to this study, however, is his use of the Gothic double to explore the anxieties and dualities of the *fin de siècle*.

In her article “Parodied to Death”, Ruth Helyer suggests that “Classic Gothic Doubles, such as Jekyll and Hyde [...] continue in the postmodern Gothic, showing Patrick to be, at the same time, both wealthy executive *and* brutal killer, seemingly ‘charming’ date *and* sexual partner from Hell, one of the boys *and* rampant homophobic” (740). She suggests this duality, along with the novel’s reoccurring motif of mistaken identity—which frequently sees Patrick responding “as if he *were* that person” when he is addressed by the wrong name, produces an “unnerving, multifaceted identity” (740). However, Helyer’s article fails to take into account the unreliability of Patrick’s narration; she interprets “the feeling of Patrick making his own re-make of a film” as evidence that he feels he can behave as he likes because he experiences life as an “act” in which he is an actor, and, therefore, he is able to suppress his moral conscience in order to carry out despicable actions (744). Instead, if we follow Elizabeth Young in remaining open to the possibility

that the cinematic imagery in the novel demonstrates not only metaphorical artificiality (the narrator's perception of the world as somehow unreal or surface-like), but also as evidence of the *literal* artifice of the novel itself (fashioned, as it is, from the solipsism of our unreliable narrator's imagination), then we can come to understand that Patrick's Gothic double really lies in the discrepancy between how he views himself and how others view him.

Patrick would have us believe that he is an object of admiration, that several women and men desire him or are in love with him, that he has the respect of his peers, and that he is a great success, the quintessential embodiment of the American Dream. As well as this, Patrick would have us believe that he is a serial killer and a mass murderer (which Young points out are two very distinct criminal types which have "never been known to co-exist in one person" ("Beast" 115)) who tortures, rapes, mutilates, and murders multiple victims. This information does not fit, however, with the view others have of him, or indeed with his own narration as a whole, which fundamentally reveals him to be a highly unreliable narrator. When Patrick says he is a psychopath, confessing, as he does, on numerous occasions, it is almost as if he is begging others to take him seriously; the violent fantasies act as a vehicle through which he can simulate himself being assertive, having a unified sense of self, and feeling alive: a temporary alleviation of his existential crisis by retreating into bad faith.

The scene which most blatantly illustrates a counter-version to his self-presentation occurs near the end of the novel in the chapter "New Club", where Patrick confronts Harold Carnes about a confession he left on Carnes' answering machine at the end of the chapter "Chase, Manhattan", a message in which he "decides to make public what has been, until now, my private dementia", and claims to have committed "thirty, forty, a hundred murders" (338). In "New Club", Patrick engages Carnes in a conversation about the message, but Carnes mistakes him for someone else while continuing to discuss Patrick

Bateman, giving the reader a glimpse of Patrick seemingly unmediated, and thus undistorted, by his narration. In his guide to *American Psycho*, Julian Murphet emphasises the importance of this scene: “Here, in what for Patrick must be his greatest moment of exposure and shame, is what a first person narrator can never normally attain: a moment of objective self-knowledge, reached through the mistaken identity of a third person” (48). Carnes thinks the message was a joke, one that was “amusing” but for one “fatal flaw”: that Patrick is “such a bloody ass-kisser, such a brown-nosing goody-goody, that I couldn’t fully appreciate it” (372). When pressed, he goes on to claim that Patrick “could barely *pick up* an escort girl, let alone [...] ‘chop her up’” (373). Carnes also says that Evelyn dumped Patrick, rather than vice versa as Patrick relates to us in the chapter “At Another New Restaurant” (325-29), as well as stating that he has recently had dinner in London with Paul Owen—Patrick’s business rival whose murder is described on pages 208-9. Carnes’ claims, which Patrick fails to deny, shatter the vestiges of the self-image as a notorious villain that Patrick has been constructing for the reader during the course of the novel. Murphet suggests that Patrick’s “virtual concession as narrator of everything Carnes has said” results in a “collapse of his entire narrative construction” (49), leaving us with the possibility that Patrick has only fantasised about being a Mr Hyde or a Dorian Gray, weaving his delusions of grandeur and moral debauchery into the textual fabric of the novel. In existential terms, by imaginatively constructing an “essence” at odds with his “existence”, Patrick has made his life absurd, and throughout the novel he has been shirking the burden of responsibility and freedom by living in bad faith instead of pursuing the existential ideal of authenticity.

The use of the double in *Fight Club* follows the traditional Gothic convention more closely than *American Psycho*. As we have seen, the use of first person perspective in *American Psycho* complicates the double motif, and it is in moments of “objective self-knowledge” that the schism between Patrick’s narration and our tenuous grasp of the

novel's reality is revealed (Murphet 48). Marla performs a similar function for the narrator of *Fight Club* as Carnes does for Patrick. Marla is in a sexual relationship with Tyler, but she sees Tyler and the narrator as the same person rather than as separate personalities inhabiting the same body at different times. Thus, the narrator, who wonders "if Tyler and Marla are the same person" because he never sees them together (65), is as puzzled by Marla's attachment to him as she is by his indifference to her. Tyler forbids the narrator to talk to Marla about him, a form of the Gothic "unspeakable" or "inexpressible predicament" (Kuhn 40), which traps the narrator in this love triangle under the oppressive power of his double.

Tyler Durden enters the narrative, and is first understood by the reader (and the narrator) to be a separate person to the narrative voice, just as in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* the reader and the characters engaged in solving the mystery first believe Hyde to be a separate person to Jekyll. In *Fight Club*, the mystery is unravelled as the narrator gradually realises that he and Tyler are the same person, culminating in Tyler's visit to the narrator's bedside to tell him "We're not two separate men" (167). Tyler's presence here recalls the traditional Gothic incubus as well as the representation of Hyde in Utterson's nightmare as "a figure to whom power was given, and even at that dead hour he must rise and do its bidding" (13). Palahniuk's use of the double actually follows Utterson's understanding of Jekyll/Hyde's relationship in this dream sequence more than the chemical transformation device—which combines, like Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the Gothic and modern science—that Stevenson uses to explain the uncanny.

Tyler takes over the narrator's body when the narrator falls asleep; the body then wakes as Tyler who rises to work his mischief. This duality is hinted at early on in the novel when the narrator comments: "Because of his nature, Tyler could only work night jobs [...] Some people are night people. Some people are day people. I could only work a day job" (25). The split resulting in the doppelgänger is psychological, rather than chemical

as it is in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*; the narrator attempts to wrestle control back from Tyler by engaging his reason, thinking “Oh, this is bullshit. This is a dream. Tyler is a projection. He’s a dissociative personality disorder. A psychogenic fugue state. Tyler Durden is my hallucination”, to which Tyler responds “Fuck that shit [...] Maybe you’re my schizophrenic hallucination” (168). Regardless of the medical explanation for the double, its source in *Fight Club* is still the same as it is in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *American Psycho*: repression.

For Jekyll, his double allows him to vicariously indulge his baser instincts free from the repression of Victorian civility in the hope that “the unjust might go his way, delivered from the aspirations and remorse of his upright twin; and the just could walk steadfastly and secure, on his upward path” (61). Jekyll’s folly is to think that he can banish his darker side by distancing himself from it, when in fact, this approach only gives “the unjust” greater power. The novella’s characters explicitly associate Hyde with evil and the primitive; he is described by Utterson as being “hardly human” and “troglydytic”, as well as having “Satan’s signature” upon his face (16). Stevenson, frustrated that his novella was being interpreted as a warning against the dangers of sexuality itself, clarified that “The hypocrite let out the beast Hyde—who is no more sensual than another, but who is the essence of cruelty and malice, and selfishness and cowardice: and these are the diabolic in man” (qtd. in Clemens 130). Clemens suggests that the reason the story was “so disturbing and yet fascinating” for its Victorian readership stemmed from the repression and hypocrisy of Victorian society in general (Clemens 130).

For the narrator of *Fight Club*, his double has a higher intention; Tyler has a political and moral motive for existential awakening, a quest which indulges in amoral behaviour along the way, but which does not have depravity or evil as its purpose. Andrew Ng understands Tyler as “the Narrator’s desire to surpass his existential limitation and to transform his being”; hence, the Gothic convention of the double “effectively captures the

existential dilemma experienced by the Narrator, whose symptoms of malaise and redundancy necessarily provoke a reconstitution of being in the form of an alter ego” (“Muscular Existentialism” 117-18). Ng suggests that by appropriating the Gothic double for the expression of existentialism, Palahniuk shifts the split inherent in the internal struggle from the traditional good/evil binary towards a division demonstrating Sartre’s notions of being-in-itself contending with being-for-itself (124). Put simply, being-in-itself is the existence of objects or “things”, the stable existence of unconscious beings, whereas being-for-itself is purposive and conscious, exhibiting self-awareness and self-reflection (Detmer 64). Sartre suggests that human beings vacillate between these two states, sometimes desiring both at the same time (Detmer 128). This contradictory desire for being-in-itself-for-itself stems from a yearning for self-contained completion, a fixed essence, an absolute state of stability and perfection that Sartre equates to a desire to be God (Detmer 128). This desire for being-in-itself-for-itself is rooted in bad faith and doomed to failure, however, because the being sought negates the freedom of the seeker who pursues a fixed essence. In *Fight Club*, the narrator’s static existence at the start of the novel, characterised by powerless inertia and bad faith as a “tourist” in the support group meetings (24), is transformed by the appearance of Tyler, who instigates the project of being-for-itself and transcendence. However, as I have already discussed in chapter two, Tyler increasingly pursues a project of being-in-itself-for-itself, a doomed enterprise that propels the novel towards its violent climax.

In Stevenson’s novella, atavism is seen as something to be feared, whereas in Tyler’s philosophy it is a goal; his desire to return man to his hunter-gatherer roots is intended to instigate a more authentic existence amidst the meaningless absurdity of postmodern life. Tyler’s hyper-masculine physicality and sexual vitality present traces of the Victorian fear of the “beast within”, but in such a way that the beast becomes, at least for a while, compelling; Tyler is charming and attractive in contrast to Hyde, whose atavism causes

people to feel repelled by him. Nevertheless, *Fight Club*, like *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, suggests that to deny or ignore man's primitive origins and the remnants of those instincts in modern man in the hope that they might go away is to run the risk of blindly stumbling, as the narrator/Tyler do, into the extremes of fascism when repressed emotion takes on a life of its own.

American Psycho also contains this warning. Patrick counterbalances his feelings of disempowerment by styling himself as a modern day Ripper; his repressed "will to power"—to use Nietzsche's term—finding extreme expression. Patrick's crimes mirror those of Jack the Ripper in several respects, such as his sexually motivated indulgence in mutilation and the occasional removal of his victim's body parts. Like the Ripper, several of Patrick's victims are vulnerable prostitutes, and just as the Ripper was understood as an allegory for East/West London duality and the endemic poverty inflicted by the systematic exploitation of the poor by the rich, so too have several critics understood Patrick's murderous intentions as symbolic of the wider effects of capitalism and the attacks by the State on those vulnerable in American society. Both Julian Murphet and John Conley discuss the novel in relation to the historical context of "rampant gentrification" and "Class War" occurring in Manhattan during the time Ellis was writing (Murphet 59-60; Conley 126-27). Conley, in his article "The Poverty of Bret Easton Ellis" (2009), argues that Ellis is "first and foremost a writer of capitalism, which is to say, he is first and foremost a writer of poverty" (119). As Murphet suggests, on an "allegorical" level, Patrick Bateman's acts of violence "*do happen*" because "the new ruling class of Reagan's America was inflicting all kinds of violence on workers, homeless people, ethnic minorities and women, in effect much worse than the lurid and rococo violence of Bateman's discourse" (54).

The existential crisis arising from Patrick's duality is symbolic of a larger crisis in American national identity. In the last chapter of the novel Patrick is drinking and

watching television with several of his yuppie pals in a bar called “Harry’s” when “scenes from President Bush’s inauguration” are shown along with “a speech from former president Reagan”, leading to what Patrick describes as a “tiresome debate” over whether Reagan is “lying or not” (381, 382). The mysterious Tim Price, who Patrick describes in the first chapter of the novel as “the only interesting person I know” (21), tries to stir up some indignation over the discrepancy between Reagan’s appearance and what is “inside” him, between rhetoric and reality, saying “How can he lie like that? How can he pull that *shit*? [...] I don’t believe it. He looks so...*normal*. He seems so...out of it. So...*undangerous*”, to which McDermot responds “He *is* totally harmless [...] *Was* totally harmless. Just like *you* are totally harmless. But he *did* do all that shit” (381-82).

Murphet, who describes this scene as “as close as the novel gets to a genuine political discussion”, interprets the “shit” being discussed as a reference to Reagan’s involvement in the Iran-Contra affair, whereby Reagan becomes like “the ‘psycho’ of the novel’s title, selling arms to Iran to back genocide in Nicaragua” (54). While the others are not interested in political debate, Price presses his point, saying “I don’t get how someone, anyone, can appear that way yet be involved in such total shit [...] He presents himself as a harmless old codger. But inside...” (382). This creates an interesting parallel with Patrick himself, whose external appearance hides a psychotic internal life. Patrick’s interest in the conversation “flickers briefly”, but when Price “can’t finish his sentence, can’t find the last two words he needs”, Patrick finishes it for him, musing that what is inside “*doesn’t matter*” (382); the façade has taken the place of truth, recalling Patrick’s earlier comment that “Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in...this was civilization as I saw it, colossal and jagged” (360). Patrick does not allow himself to feel the hypocrisy that drives Jekyll to suicide; he fails to confront, what Jekyll calls, “the horror of my other self” (76). This scene at the end of *American Psycho* suggests that America itself is also incapable of such self-reflection.

Whether embodied by Mr Hyde and Jack the Ripper, or Tyler Durden and Patrick Bateman in the postmodern moment, the Victorian notion of the “beast within” engages with societal fears of the primitive other by personifying atavism in a single figure while sub-textually probing the civility of society as a whole. Ellis and Palahniuk use the Gothic double to express the duality of the civilised and the barbaric in the postmodern subject. Their characters represent both the Gothic hero on an “insane pursuit of the Absolute” (Thompson 2) as well as the Gothic monster. The use of the double in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* complicates the characters’ existential crisis, presenting another obstacle on the path to a unified and authentic sense of self, and another temptation to retreat into bad faith. Berthold Schoene writes that “there are no characters in *American Psycho* who are not primarily reflections or imaginary extensions of Patrick’s self”, the novel being populated by “a long series of doppelgängers” (382). Thus, he views Patrick’s violence as an attempt to murder “the parts of himself that he loathes the most” and a “desperate battle for the self” (383)—a Gothic struggle that recalls the suicides of Dr Jekyll and Dorian Gray, both attempts to escape the horrifying monster of their duality through death. This echo is even more explicit in *Fight Club* where the relationship of the narrator and Tyler is initially mutually beneficial before deteriorating to the point where the narrator attempts to commit suicide in order to destroy Tyler—just as Jekyll and Hyde start off in harmony and end up in conflict. In a significant twist on the Gothic convention, the narrator of *Fight Club* somehow manages to survive. In avoiding the finality of death the narrator’s existential quest for meaning continues, but it also leaves him in a state of uncertainty as to whether his doppelgänger has really been banished from his psyche after all.

In Ellis and Palahniuk’s texts a notable departure from their modern Gothic antecedents is the graphic depiction of material that, in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Dorian Gray*, is mostly “unspeakable”. We are never quite sure exactly what nefarious activities Jekyll/Hyde and

Dorian have been indulging in under the guise of their doubleness, activating the powers of the reader's imagination to fill these unsettling gaps. Jekyll is a "secret sinner" who conceals his "undignified" "pleasures" "with an almost morbid sense of shame" (72, 66, 60). Once his double has freed him from moral constraints these "pleasures" begin "to turn toward the monstrous", plunging Jekyll "into a kind of wonder at [his] vicarious depravity" (66). While he can hint at these actions, such as his disturbing description of Hyde "drinking pleasure with bestial avidity from any degree of torture to another; relentless like a man of stone", he will not discuss any particulars: "Into the details of the infamy at which I thus connived (for even now I can scarce grant that I committed it) I have no design of entering" (66).

Similarly, when Basil Hallward confronts Dorian about his infamous reputation, saying "I think it right that you should know that the most dreadful things are being said against you in London" (Wilde 126), he nevertheless cannot bring himself to voice the details. The things Hallward has heard but cannot reiterate are tantalisingly alluded to, but not disclosed to the reader; we do not know what "horrible" story Lord Staveley tells Hallward "before everybody" at a dinner party, prompting Hallward to ask Dorian "Why is your friendship so fateful to young men?" (127), and we do not know how Dorian is implicated in the death letter of Lord Gloucester's wife, "the most terrible confession" Hallward has ever read (129). The stories of Dorian "creeping at dawn out of dreadful houses and slinking in disguise into the foulest dens in London" hint at the sexual nature of his depravity, while withholding the final truth (128). By employing the Gothic "unspeakable", Wilde makes Dorian's corruption universal; when defending his novel against charges of indecency in July 1890, Wilde commented: "Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray. What Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them" (qtd. in Dryden 3)

In contrast, Patrick Bateman's "sins" are described in graphic and unrelenting detail, so much detail in fact, that the realism of what is being narrated is sometimes undermined. Indeed, Murphet comments that Patrick's description of Paul Owen's murder "is not the prose of someone hacking someone else to death in the heat of the present tense; it is the prose of someone lovingly contemplating the thought of hacking someone to death in the eternal slow-motion of pure solipsism" (45). In *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden and the narrator's violent and grotesque behaviour is also given full expression, presenting the reader with descriptions of rendering soap from human body fat, ejaculating into food to be served at restaurants, as well as descriptions of horrific fights, such as: "the guy gets me in a full nelson and rams my face [...] into the concrete floor until my teeth inside snap off and plant their jagged roots into my tongue" (199). The "unspeakable" remains a potent force in these novels, however, although it has been shifted to a new realm of forbidden knowledge.

In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick examines a variety of ways that the "unspeakable" can work in the Gothic novel: as a "theme" and as a device that implies "a range of reflections on language" (4). In relation to *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Sedgwick describes a function of the unspeakable as

an interpersonal barrier where no barrier ought to be—language is properly just the medium that should flow between people, mitigating their physical and psychic separateness—but once that barrier has come into being, it is breached only at the cost of violence and deepened separateness.

[...]

Any dire knowledge that is shared but cannot be acknowledged to be shared—that is, as it were, shared separately—has the effect of rendering the people, whom it ought to bind together, into irrevocable doubleness. (16-17)

In *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, this “dire knowledge” is existential crisis: the awareness of the absurd, the glimpses of the void, the vertigo of freedom, which the narrator of *Fight Club* and Patrick Bateman experience, but struggle to articulate clearly. The popularity and spread of the fight clubs in Palahniuk’s novel implies that the narrator’s existential despair with his lifestyle is endemic to his generation, the clubs providing an outlet for that frustration in which there is no need to speak as “what happens doesn’t happen in words” (199). The fighters breach the verbal boundary of their anguish “at the cost of violence”, the “deepened separateness” of the sadomasochistic relationship, and the “irrevocable doubleness” of their secret lives at the club, because “Who guys are in fight club is not who they are in the real world. Even if you told the kid in the copy centre that he had a good fight, you wouldn’t be talking to the same man” (49). The first rule of the club, “you don’t talk about fight club” (48), uses the unspeakable to protect the club from the “real world” in much the same way that Tyler protects his existence by forbidding the narrator from talking about him to Marla.

Sedgwick suggests that Gothic novels “deal with things that are naturalistically difficult to talk about, like guilt”, but “they describe the difficulty, not in terms of resistances that may or may not be overcome, but in terms of an absolute, often institutional prohibition or imperative” (14). Even more difficult to express than “guilt”, is the idea that one finds the world to be meaningless and absurd, and the characters in Ellis and Palahniuk’s novels find this particularly difficult because the discourses of consumer culture are constantly bombarding them with manufactured meaning in an attempt to sell products. In the milieu of the books, this predicament is widely shared, but often unacknowledged. Elizabeth Young sees Patrick’s insanity as symptomatic of the unspeakable madness of consumerist society: “What drives Patrick crazy is driving us all crazy—why don’t we all just crack up and start screaming about brand-names and up-town pizza recipes, like he does? Thus, detail by detail, as if bricking up a tomb, Ellis defines Patrick’s insanity and our own place

within it” (“Beast” 103). In *Fight Club*, Tyler’s anti-consumerist message is a response to the narrator’s existential despair with his life at the start of the novel, a response the narrator unconsciously wants to say but is unable to articulate himself. Thus, his double allows him to overcome the unspeakable by allowing him to see its content as distinct from himself, repeating several times: “Tyler’s words coming out of my mouth” (98). Cynthia Kuhn notes, in her article on *Fight Club* and the Gothic, “A grip on textuality—a meaningful voice—eludes [the narrator]” and because of this he “turns to other speakers for authorship” (40).

Patrick’s existential crisis is amplified by the frustrating and alienating effects of the unspeakable. During a conversation with his girlfriend Evelyn, he comments that “she doesn’t hear a word; nothing registers. She does not fully grasp a *word* I’m saying. My essence is eluding her” (120), an evaluation that could easily be extended to most of the dialogue in the novel which is characterised by its inanity and the absence of any real communication. Patrick is also incapable of expressing his psychotic tendencies to anyone, and the guilt which he feels but is unable to share fuels his insanity and despair. Patrick’s attempts at confession are evident throughout the book, ranging from casual comments about how he has “killed [...] two black kids” during a conversation with Evelyn (116), to the desperation with which he tries to convince Carnes of the veracity of his answering machine confession: “Now, Carnes. Listen to me. Listen very, very carefully. I-killed-Paul-Owen-and-I-liked-it. I can’t make myself any clearer.’ My stress causes me to choke on the words” (373). The isolation of the unspeakable is also a contributing factor to Patrick’s psychotic behaviour. Sedgwick suggests that in *Melmoth* the privation of verbal communication is treated “as though language were some sort of safety valve between the inside and the outside which being closed off, all knowledge, even when held in common, becomes solitary, furtive, and explosive” (17). Patrick’s explosively violent outbursts can be

interpreted, on one level, as an attempt to overcome his alienation and communicate with the Other within the forced and terrifying intimacy of sadistic assault.

On a metafictional level, Patrick concludes that *American Psycho* as a whole is a failure of communication, of no value to himself as narrator or for us as readers:

there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling. There has been no reason for me to tell you any of this. This confession has meant *nothing* (362)

Ellis' novel—which takes the form of Patrick's "confession"—*intentionally* avoids conveying a stable sense of "being" or "reality" as a source of meaning, and instead attempts to evoke a sense of "nothingness", a glimpse of the void gaping beneath the surface of Patrick's postmodern existence. The reader's slippery grasp of the novel's textual reality is itself indicative of a language barrier; Sedgwick comments that "it is possible to discern a play of the unspeakable in the narrative structure itself of a novel that ostensibly comprises transcriptions of manuscripts that are always illegible at revelatory moments" (5). This is particularly applicable to *American Psycho*—an unreliable narrative within which we can be certain of nothing and where an unspeakable "nothingness" is perhaps the point, but also within *Fight Club*. Both novels depict struggles for a "meaningful voice" as the characters attempt to articulate existential crisis (Kuhn 40), and within the overall Gothic aesthetic of these works the "unspeakable" conveys the alienation and dangers of existential quest.

Conclusion

In *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, Ellis and Palahniuk repeatedly accentuate the void at the centre of a civilisation where culture is bland, community is absent, inequality is accepted, morality is bankrupt, and everything is “Surface, surface, surface” (*American Psycho* 360). The rich vein of existential thought in these novels is interlaced with a social critique that satirises the illusion that modern consumer capitalism can provide meaning for its adherents. The absurdity of this illusion is a central component in driving the existential crises of Patrick Bateman and the narrator of *Fight Club*. This predicament registers what Kelton Cobb calls, in *Theology and Popular Culture* (2005), “a loss of faith”:

Not the loss of faith in God, or in transcendent reality—that loss was already sustained in the early twentieth century, as reported in advance by Nietzsche—but a second-stage loss of faith in the very things that compensated us for our loss of God. According to this view, our time is suffering from a loss of faith in progress [...] in the capacity of modernity to provide our lives with a sense of meaning, whether through science, art, democratic institutions, or modern master narratives of global harmony. And most recently, there is a gathering disillusionment with the promises of material consumption, with the ideology of consumerism itself. (9)

For the existential protagonist at the end of the twentieth century, this “second-stage loss of faith” exacerbates the absence of an adequate extant reason for living, leading to the experience of absurdity, nothingness, angst, and the whole plethora of existential crisis symptoms evident in the fictional works of existentialism’s original proponents. Coping with the loss of inherent meaning was a central concern for the original existentialists, but, in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, the tone with which these continual layers of loss are registered is far more cynical and ironic than the inquisitive optimism and resolve to be found in *Nausea* and *The Outsider*. The driving purpose of the classics of existential fiction

is the ontological quest of the individual; in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, however, this personal journey is destabilised by the satirical function of the existential thought. Instead, the individual existential crisis is used to register an unresolved general crisis in the culture of the milieu.

The combination of satire and existentialism extends the social critique beyond mere ridicule and comedy, evident in the focus in both novels on the loss of an inherited identity evoked by the decline of patriarchy. *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* both explore the complications that arise within a milieu where traditional notions of masculinity have become redundant, repressed, and dangerous. The violence depicted in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* is not advocated as a *solution* to the crisis of masculinity, rather, it is depicted as a hyperbolic *symptom* of existential crisis which demonstrates Sartre's theory of sadism as a doomed attempt to engage "the other". This violence is consistent with the satire of these contemporary texts, which both deride excess; thus, the violence can be understood as an observation on the excess of violence in our culture generally, and just as the characters use violence to break through their ennui, so too are the texts capable of forcing the reader to engage their human emotions and personal morality through the trauma of reading within a narrative space where human compassion is often markedly absent (Kavadlo 7). As self-reflective critiques of regressive hyper-masculinity, these two novels advance a feminist subtext that probes the relevance of masculinity in the modern world.

The graphic violence of *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* represents a shift in the representation of existential crisis from that found in *Nausea* and *The Outsider* towards a grisly visual palette of bruises, blood, and the grotesque that draws upon the brooding aesthetic of the modern Gothic. More than a mere visual atmosphere, however, these novels use Gothic conventions to develop the existential conditions of their protagonists, exploring the workings of repression and duality in the postmodern subject. Ellis and Palahniuk complicate the path of existential quest by using the Gothic double to fragment

or divide their character's sense of self, to the extent that the resolution of existential crisis, and the subsequent attainment of an authentic existence, is problematic or withheld entirely. The Gothic unspeakable is used to designate the forbidden knowledge of existential crisis, while amplifying the alienation the characters feel due to the difficulty of expressing their condition. The double and the unspeakable are also used to intensify both novels' preoccupations with textual ambiguity and narrative unreliability.

The existential thought underlying the Gothic elements of these novels also indicates a satirical function that, like the violent content, pushes the reader to connect with a larger framework of serious societal critique, to read the novels as a commentary on the bad faith and dualities of the late-capitalist modern era. At the same time, the introduction of the Gothic is concurrent with the playful approach that Ellis and Palahniuk adopt towards existentialism, and, as such, the Gothic performs a similar function to the postmodern stylistic arsenal of sardonic irony, parody, melodrama, and self-mockery, deployed within these texts to subvert the philosophy, mischievously experimenting with its implications within the realm of fiction. This helps to keep the idealism of existentialism secondary to the primary function of these texts, which is to be inventive works of fictional literature and not ontological textbooks. Existential thought is used in such a way that it is conveyed but not necessarily advocated to the reader, who is presented with symptoms and questions rather than cures and solutions. As such, the existential thought of these novels is more closely aligned with the feverish discontent of Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche, with Camus' absurdism, and Sartre's first foray into existential angst in *Nausea*, than the fully formed ontology of *Being and Nothingness*. In *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, Ellis and Palahniuk repeatedly display a mistrust of discourses that tell us how to live. Instead, these texts uncompromisingly probe modern existence to incite free thought so that we might consider, for ourselves, how *we* want to live.

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