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Discovering the Meaning of Life Through *Fight Club* and *Siddhartha*

In 1922, Hermann Hesse set the youth of Germany free with the glorious peace of *Siddhartha*. Nearly a century later, Chuck Palahniuk opened the eyes of countless Americans with his nihilistic masterpiece, *Fight Club*. These two novels were written in different times, in different cultures, for different readers, and for different purposes. One is the poster child for love of self and nature; the other focuses on the destruction of both man and culture, yet the two hold a startling similarity in their underlying meaning, that in a darkening world of sin and distraction, letting go is the only true path to freedom, peace, and happiness. Though vastly different, *Fight Club* and *Siddhartha* both essentially tell the same story of man's search for personal meaning.

Siddhartha is the story of a young man who leaves established society to find and create for himself a true doctrine for bliss. Raised and trained as a Brahman in a well-established religious family, Siddhartha feels vain and incomplete. He departs from his people and their lore, peacefully searching for his own dogma, what Hesse refers to as "The Self". "Siddhartha embarks on a journey of self-discovery that takes him through a period of asceticism and self denial followed by one of sensual indulgence ("Siddhartha" 255)." Siddhartha soon finds, however, that nirvana is not so easily attained. Hesse follows Siddhartha through his lifelong journey of mental confusion, emotional turmoil, physical pain and pleasure, and, ultimately, spiritual unity between himself and the world. In short, it is "Hesse's attempt to restore his faith

in mankind, to regain his lost peace of mind, and to find again a harmonious relationship with his world (“Siddhartha” 262).”

Fight Club also is a tale of a man leaving society seeking his own form of erudition, but, unlike *Siddhartha*, the unnamed narrator of *Fight Club* follows a journey that proves to be anything but peaceful. Utterly bored and trapped in a job and society that cares nothing for him, he unknowingly creates for himself a schizophrenic double, Tyler Durden, who, in the words of Jayne Margetts, “enjoys pushing life to the limit and walking a line between Russian roulette and the excitement of animal fear.” Together, they create Fight Club, a place where men come together to knock away their problems by beating each other senseless. St. Clair Carr of New Improved Head comments, “*Fight Club* is ostensibly about how two young men organize brawls to overcome the pointlessness of their feminized lives and end up developing their fight clubs into a violent nihilistic movement whose goal is the destruction of civilization.” But, underneath the blood swathed faces and the bruises of torn flesh lies a deeper man on a path of exploration, acceptance, brotherhood, and peace.

Palahniuk and Hesse are, conclusively, very different writers. Referring to his novels as, “biographies of the soul (“Siddhartha” 255),” Hermann Hesse writes for the sole purpose of teaching readers to discover meaning in a world full of distractions. All over the world, *Siddhartha* “promoted concepts of peace, love, and passive behavior as well as respect for all life (“Siddhartha” 265).” Friend Hugo Ball once named him, “the last knight in the splendid parade of romantics (Freedman 147).” Conversely, Chuck Palahniuk writes to entertain the masses and to show his thoughts, embracing distractions to entice readers into his books. Far from the romanticism of Hesse, he is described by Jayne Margetts as “the voice of youth, demanding to be heard. Youth that tears at its own flesh and rapes its own mind and hungers for the annihilation

of order, conformity, and its own humanity.” While Hesse creates his plot upon which to lay his preordained message, Palahniuk derives his message through the creation of the plot.

These opposing novels provide validity that two different authors from two different continents, cultures, and viewpoints could reach the same conclusion about life. These are *not* biased conclusions about mankind. They are the story of man traveling around the world and back only to realize the answer has been under his nose the entire time.

In both *Fight Club* and *Siddhartha*, the primary step for a man to discern meaning in his life is to first realize his own incompleteness and narcissism. Both the narrator of *Fight Club* and *Siddhartha* leave their lives and embark upon a journey toward an indiscernible destination. *Siddhartha* is dragged away by a growing void in his soul, an emptiness of both mind and body. He “awakens one day to the realization that his life is empty and that his soul is not satisfied by his devotion to duty and strict observances of religious ordinances (“*Siddhartha*” 261).” The narrator of *Fight Club* shares a similar fate, but, unlike *Siddhartha*, he has no religious ordinances or family ties from which to sever himself. He is simply driven by the incredible futility of his life. Leaving the world and shunning everything they know, each character searches for a first-hand knowledge of life, seeking to create themselves anew.

Driven by a desire for empirical wisdom, each man chooses to shun all teachers and books, perpetually searching for the secret of himself. *Siddhartha* reaches this revelation during his encounter with Gotama Buddha, The Illustrious One. Seeing the beautiful perfection of Gotama, he understands in his heart that it is not Gotama’s teachings he needs. Instead, *Siddhartha* is searching to create the peace and unity of Gotama’s verve inside his own heart (“*Siddhartha*” 270). Chaman L. Sahni tells that, “*Siddhartha*’s rejection of the teachings of Buddha served as a turning a point in his quest, fortifying his conviction that, to attain the state of perfect enlightenment, he, too, must extinguish his ego and merge with the unity underlying

the universe.” *Fight Club*’s narrator follows a similar path of self-taught enlightenment, but, lacking the conviction to press on alone, his subconscious creates Tyler Durden. He becomes his own mentor, progressively guiding himself towards renaissance. As their lives evolve, however, both characters discover that the path to the self is not as predictable or simple as they had originally imagined.

Initially, both characters shun their own desires to search for a meaning within the subtext of the world. Each is searching for an escape from reality, but neither can find it. Attending self-help support groups, the narrator of *Fight Club* uses the pain of others to sluice away the troubled tension of his own soul. When their pain is not enough, he joins with Tyler Durden to establish an underground Fight Club, where men come together to wash themselves clean in their own blood. Bob Wake claims, “The fighting is an existential metaphor for men trying desperately to reassert their masculine identities in the face of dehumanizing jobs and meaningless lives.” Immersing themselves in the moment of the fight, all other problems fade away. Palahniuk writes, “Nothing was solved when the fight was over, but nothing mattered (53).” Siddhartha shuns his soul by joining the Samanas, who, “have only one goal, to become empty of thirst, desire, dreams, pleasure, and sorrow, and, thus, to let the Self die (“Siddhartha” 260).” Practicing deep meditation, he attempts to transcend himself by projecting his consciousness into various objects in the world, but he eventually realizes that the soul *cannot be transcended*. Both characters find that man *is* and always will be; there is no escape from the soul. As Thomas F. Barry writes, running from reality merely exacerbates life. Both men find temporary peace by living in the passion of the moment; they do not realize they are living in the *wrong* moment. Tyler Durden says it best, “This is the greatest moment in your life, and you’re off somewhere missing it (Palahniuk 77).” Happiness is not found in a cancer patient or a fox in

the woods or a bloody knob of a fist, but instead requires captivation in the total unity of self and nature.

Through their failures, neither of the men realizes this true reason why they are not happy; instead, each reverses from a life of abstemious fascination with the world to a sensual immersion in personal indulgence. Siddhartha finds Kamala, an irresistible courtesan, and Tyler finds Marla, a jobless, hopeless, penniless girl from a bad part of town. In his article “Siddhartha”, David Galens writes, “He immerses himself in material and carnal pursuits, but this life of body brings him no closer to his goal (262).” Each indulges themselves sexually to the very ends of excess, yet neither learns the secret of women, of love, or of themselves. Physical pleasure yields to them absolutely nothing, leaving them, once again, broken, alone, and unhappy.

It is at this point that Siddhartha and the narrator of *Fight Club* hit an absolute spiritual low. When man has searched the world over for meaning and found his labor vain; when man realizes his own efforts are useless; when man reaches a state of absolute dejection; it is only then that he may build himself into something better. St. Clair Carr points to *Fight Club* as “a literary exercise whose point is not communication but the frustration of it. It is an exercise – a deliberate one, I am sure – in futility.” Indeed, futility is the foundation their pending enlightenment will be built upon. Whether pondering suicide beside a rushing river or standing atop a building wired with explosives, both of these men must realize that their hopelessness is not isolated and unnecessary; they are exactly where they need to be. Pain and sorrow exists to show them their insufficiency to govern their own lives; it strips them down to a purified form where they will be in a position to truly learn. About his moment of deepest depression, Siddhartha explains,

I learned through my body and soul that it was necessary for me to sin, that I needed lust, that I had to strive for property and experience nausea and the depths of despair in order to learn not to resist them, in order to learn to love the world, and no longer compare it with some kind of desired imaginary world, some imaginary vision of perfection, but to leave it as it is, to love it and be glad to belong to it. (Hesse 144)

Fight Club's Tyler Durden declares, "If you lose your nerve before you hit the bottom, you'll never really succeed. [...] Only after disaster can we be resurrected. [...] It's only after you've lost everything that you're free to do anything (Palahniuk 70)." It is only when a man's blackboard is completely barren that he can grip the chalk of life and redraw himself. Whether it is *Fight Club's* resolute journey towards collapse or Siddhartha's ineffective search for inner peace, man must reach a state of absolute depredation before he can be built into something better.

Alone and at the point of ruin, both characters in question end their journey with a sudden and glorious blast of enlightenment. Bryan Aubrey writes that, poised beside a river, Siddhartha's consciousness reaches nirvana only when he attains the ability to silently and sincerely listen. Becoming a synthesis of extremes, "He sees the great mistake in trying always to do something instead of just to be ("Siddhartha" 263)." He later tells a friend that his peace was obtained by realizing that all events occur simultaneously, that all is connected ("Siddhartha" 263). His happiness is found in a complacent and never-ending love for everything ("Siddhartha" 261-262). Bryan Aubrey best summarizes Siddhartha's bliss as one that, "He cannot find either by rejecting the world, but neither can he take the opposite route and indulge the senses. He must indeed embrace the world." In the end, he attains his goal by finding the faultless tranquility of Gotama Buddha within his own soul.

Equally powerful is the bliss found within *Fight Club*. Atop a burning world, surrounded by a smoldering society, and engulfed from head to toe with the words of Tyler Durden, the narrator of *Fight Club* shoves a loaded pistol between his jaws and pulls the trigger to kill Tyler Durden, the Tyler Durden who pummeled the faces of countless businessmen, the Tyler Durden who raped the minds of children by splicing pornography into cartoons, the Tyler Durden who represented all malevolent potential within. By killing Tyler Durden, he leaves for himself a purified shell ready to be rebuilt. St. Clair Carr writes, “The conclusion of *Fight Club* is not a brilliant resolution of the themes of the book, but instead a revelation that the whole discussion of themes in the preceding 200 pages was a sham.” The resolution of *Fight Club* is contained in one simple passage in the last chapter. “We are not special. We are not crap or trash, either. We just are. We just are, and what happens just happens (Palahniuk 207).” He finds his inner peace by realizing that he does not need fights or mischief or mayhem. Like Siddhartha, he finds nirvana by accepting the perfect unity of the universe.

There is no story more beautiful than that of man’s search for meaning. Both *Hermann Hesse* and *Chuck Palahniuk* teach this meaning with simplicity and style. They have changed lives and changed nations. Though very different, *Fight Club* and *Siddhartha* reach the same conclusion. Pain, sorrow, and fighting are merely steps in the vast journey of life, gradually leading to a beautiful tomorrow. In the end, it is not the journey that matters, but the present moment and how it is used to love the world. In that perfect love, the soul of man is truly free.

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