Breaking the First Rule of Fight Club; An Existential Examination

A film with a title like Fight Club naturally leads viewers to believe that they can assume what it is about. Though underneath the high levels of testosterone, flying fists, and bloody fights with the winners banging on their chests lies much more meaningful themes of the human nature to examine. The fighting itself is not used to glorify violence or promote the use of actual fight clubs but instead it is meant to represent the resistance against conforming and the struggle to find identity and self-worth. The film Fight Club can be analyzed and interpreted in many ways but I choose to view the film from an existential perspective in which the unnamed protagonist’s inner conflict stems from not having truly created his “essence” yet, as Jean-Paul Sartre and other existentialists would say, and feeling that his existence has no meaning or purpose.

Jean-Paul Sartre states that “…existence precedes essence…” (Sartre 500) and this is a central claim of existentialism but what does this mean and why is it so important? “It means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards defines himself.” (Sartre 501). This claim reverses the traditional philosophical idea that nature or essence of a thing is more fundamental than its existence. The existentialist believes that human beings create their own values and essence free of any predetermined nature or inherent identity. The unnamed protagonist, who I will refer to as Jack like written in the film’s script, leads a normal life with a stable job and lives in a nice apartment in a big city. However, his life also feels vacant and he
finds himself becoming more lethargic as time goes on since he lacks individuality and defines himself by the things he owns instead of his beliefs or actions. At one point in the film he admits “I’d flip through catalogs and wonder ‘What kind of dining set defines me as a person?’” (Fight Club). His life had consisted of failed attempts to define himself with objects like expensive furniture and the nice apartment he lived in but in the end he was still left feeling apathetic and detached in his existence. This is because Jack has not yet realized that his very logic is flawed and he must understand that his essence cannot be found within inanimate objects and the only thing that can truly define his essence or nature is himself. His lack of action and his uncertainty when it comes to his identity have lead him to exist with a false prefabricated essence which he cannot bear “I am Jack’s wasted life” (Fight club). Even though Jack is vaguely aware of his passive existence he continues going through life on autopilot, that is until Tyler Durden comes onto the scene. Tyler quickly becomes the key component to Jack’s awakening and gives him the last push to finally venture into his existential journey.

Sartre explains “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism.” (Sartre 501) and Jack must recognize this before he can make significant changes in his life. Meeting Tyler on a flight coming back from a business trip and coming home to find that his apartment was destroyed by an explosion sets this discovery in motion when he decides to meet Tyler for a drink afterward. He is almost panicking now that everything he owned, the very same things he used to define himself, are all gone. “That was not just a bunch of stuff that got destroyed it was me!” (Fight Club). Tyler makes him realize that those things he owned did not define him as a person they defined him only as a consumer. “Things you own end up owning you.” (Fight Club). With this Jack is at a loss and more confused than ever. If all his belongings, the only things his life consisted of, actually meant
nothing what can he do to creating meaning in his life? “There is no reality except in action… Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life.” (Sartre 506).

Tyler appears to agree with the sentiment that a person can only be defined by themselves and cannot replace identity or essence with anything else stating “You're not your job. You're not how much money you have in the bank. You're not the car you drive. You're not the contents of your wallet. You're not your fucking khakis.” (Fight Club). After Tyler forces Jack to examine his life he soon realizes that it was not of his choosing and that he must provide meaning for himself and that this must be done through actions otherwise he would not be defining himself adequately. Tyler then challenges the idea of God and what role he would play in life if he did exist.

There are both existentialists who believe in God and who do not. However, in both cases it is still thought that existence precedes essence and that each person must make independent choices, which then shapes his or her existence. Tyler does not necessarily dismiss the idea of God’s presence but he believes that God is entirely unimportant telling Jack “You have to consider the possibility that God does not like you, never wanted you, and in all probability, he hates you.” (Fight Club). A statement like this is distressing and even the existentialist would agree. When Jean-Paul Sartre spoke of forlornness he meant “… that God does not exist and that we have to face all the consequences of this” (Sartre 503). With the idea of God’s nonexistence, or even indifference, comes the overwhelming feeling of total freedom and the crushing burden of complete responsibility. “Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist, and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within him or without does he find anything to cling to. He can’t start making excuses for himself.” (Sartre 503) This only reaffirms the idea that a person is
alone in defining themselves and that their existence precedes their essence because without God there is no human nature “…since there is no God to conceive it.” (Sartre 501) and you must then take all responsibility for who you are. After challenging Jack to examine his life, how he defines himself, and casting the significance of God aside, Tyler has succeeded in helping Jack gain a new perspective. Now that Jack feels that he is in the process of creating his essence with the help of Tyler they move on to acting on their shared beliefs and ideas.

Sartre believed through choices not only does an individual determine or create what they will be but that they choose according to what they believe a person should be. “I am creating a certain image of man of my own choosing. In choosing myself, I choose man.” (Sartre 502). Sartre claimed that by their actions humans create an image of mankind that they believe is right, since they are unable to choose evil. In their decisions they are putting a universal value to their acts by deciding in accordance with the belief that all persons should act in the same manner. After starting and expanding their fight club Tyler and Jack begin to spread the word of materialism and consumerism limiting freedom and repressing individuality. They project their set of beliefs onto others and try to convince them that their way of thinking is the correct one and should be adopted as their own way of thinking as well. Jean-Paul Sartre stated “… in creating the man that we want to be, there is not a single of our acts which does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be.” (Sartre 501) and this holds true in the cases of Tyler and Jack in this film. What someone believes and how they act on those beliefs can spread and this is exactly what Jack and Tyler strived for. Although in doing this you also discover that you must bear not only the responsibility for your actions but everyone else’s as well. “And when we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men.” (Sartre 501). Jack
has now formed his beliefs, began acting on them, and felt that he was finally making choices and living as opposed to just existing. But things quickly get out of hand and he is forced to deal with the consequences of some of the choices he’s made.

Sartre declares that existentialism “…prompts people to understand that reality alone is what counts…” (Sartre 506) but Jack soon discovers that his reality has been altered. After Tyler initiates a series of urban terrorist operations, which was labeled Project Mayhem, a botched mission he sends members on costs a man his life. Tyler was also in the process of completing his ultimate plan to erase all debt by destroying buildings that contain credit card companies' records. Jack felt that things were escalating and wanted to put a stop to it. In attempting to do so he comes to the frightening realization that he and Tyler are not two separate people, but the same. Tyler is Jack's actualized identity, and this discovery supports the existential idea that we are ultimately our own creators. "Hey, you created me. I didn't create some loser alter-ego to make myself feel better. Take some responsibility!" (Fight Club). This pivotal scene of the film also visually depicts Sartre's notion of the anguish that comes with the knowledge that not only do we create our essence, but we must accept responsibility for it as well. “… in the bright realm of values, we have no excuse behind us, nor justification before us. We are alone, with no excuses.” (Sartre 503). The physical fight that ensues between Jack and Tyler, i.e. himself, portrays the internal struggle Jack is enduring in accepting responsibility for his actions. Forming the idea of Tyler, all the crimes committed by Project Mayhem, the death of his friend because of those crimes, and even his mundane existence before creating his alter ego; these are all results of choices he made and he now realizes that he is solely responsible for all past events in his life leading up to this moment.
Only after coming to terms with his actions and accepting all responsibility does Jack take control of the situation and rid of himself of “Tyler” so he can start to put the pieces of his life back together. At the end of the film Jack’s future is unknown and after everything he endured and the realizations that were made it seems that he might be lost once again. But as Jack had said, as Tyler, earlier in the film "It's only after we've lost everything that we're free to do anything." (Fight Club). Now that he is enlightened I believe he knows that he is “condemned to be free” as Sartre would put it and though he did not choose to exist “… once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.” (Sartre 503). In the end, Jack realizes that his life is ultimately in his hands and he will continue to define himself by his actions and accept responsibility for who he is. “At first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be.” (Sartre 501). I believe Jack’s character is a true example of existentialism in that he created his own essence that most certainly came after his existence. This discovery was by no means an easy one and involved a struggle, despair, and anguish just as the existentialist would predict.
Works Cited
