

Jack's Anxieties and Defense Mechanisms in *Fight Club*

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I want to analyze a movie entitled *Fight Club* by David Fincher. It is one of Film Noir movies that is adapted from Chuck Palahniuk's novel. Film Noir usually employs mentally unstable characters. In this movie, Jack, the main character, has psychological problems which causes his anxieties. Thus, I want to find out the types of Jack's anxiety and the defense mechanism he uses to cope with it. I will identify the types of Jack's anxieties and the defense mechanisms he uses. His anxieties have led him to have insomnia, depression, and the formation of his alter ego Tyler Durden. They also cause his problematic behavior that results in the destruction of his life. In order to cope with his psychological problem, Jack uses several defense mechanisms. In my analysis, I use theory of anxieties and defense mechanisms by Sigmund Freud. Based on the analysis, I find that Jack has reality anxiety, neurotic anxiety, and moral anxiety. To cope with anxieties, he uses defense mechanisms such as repression, fixation, and regression. His anxieties and unhealthy defense mechanisms are what have driven him to have problematic behavior.

Keywords: anxiety, defense mechanism, neurotic anxiety, reality anxiety, moral anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Film noir is a crime movie but with special elements like dark visual style accompanied by narration of voice-overs and flashbacks, with mentally unstable characters. One of the film noir genre is *Fight Club*. *Fight Club* presents a character named Jack who has psychological problems in the contemporary era. *Fight Club* is a movie adaptation from a novel by Chuck Palahniuk. Later the novel was adapted into a movie directed by David Fincher. *Fight Club* is interesting to be analyzed because of its popularity. It is directed by a famous director, David Fincher. He is nominated for twice as the best director and his films have received thirty nominations at the academy awards. In 2003, Fincher was ranked 39th in *The Guardian's* 40 best directors and 23rd best film directors in 2012 by *The Guardian* for his ability to sustain tone and tension.

This paper is about the analysis of Jack's types of anxieties and his defense mechanisms to deal with his anxieties. Hall (1954) states that Freud distinguishes anxiety into three types, those are reality anxiety, neurotic anxiety, and moral anxiety, all of which are differentiated based on the sources of dangers. The dangers can lie in the external world or the internal world. In *Fight Club*, the main character Jack has three anxieties. First, Jack has reality anxiety. It is "a painful emotional experience resulting from a perception of danger in the external world" (Hall, 1954, p.63). Jack's reality anxiety is about his traumatic experience of being abandoned by his father which still influences him to his present day. Second, Jack has neurotic anxiety. It is in the form of his insecurity which inhibits him from having sexual and intimate relationships with a woman, and this causes him to live an isolated life. Third, Jack has moral anxiety. It is in the form of his desire to break free that has caused him to have moral anxiety.

JACK'S ANXIETIES

Jack experience three types of anxieties, those are reality anxiety, neurotic anxiety, and moral anxiety. First, Jack has reality anxiety because of his traumatic experiences. These traumatic experiences cause his helplessness over the loss of someone he loves. Second, Jack has neurotic

anxiety in the form of his insecurity about his sexuality. Third, Jack has moral anxiety in the form of his desire to break free from society's norm.

Jack's Reality Anxiety

Reality anxiety can turn into traumatic experience if the fear is overwhelming. "Experiences that overpower one with anxiety are called traumatic because they reduce the person to an infantile state of helplessness" (Hall, 1954, p.64). From the movie, it is seen that Jack feels helpless about his life in general. He is not happy with his life, and he is helpless about that. He has tried to do anything so he can feel happy about his life, but nothing works. He cannot help himself to live a better and more fulfilling life, no matter how hard he tries. He has tried to resolve it by indulging himself in consumerism. He thinks that buying the latest furniture would make him "complete". However, he realizes that consumerism does not work. His helplessness is also shown as he creates his imaginary friend, his alter ego, Tyler Durden. The reason for his dissatisfaction is his negative perception of himself. He feels unhappy because he feels insignificant, rejected, and unwanted as a person. This theme persists throughout the movie with his isolated and depressed life. The movie conveys it with a nihilistic theme as Jack lives his meaningless and monotonous life. This negative perception about himself is conveyed by how Jack thinks God views himself. He sees God for having rejected, hated, and unwanted him as a child. And this has consequences on how Jack has a negative perception of himself.

The conversation also shows that Jack's negative perception of himself is related to his father figure. It is seen that Jack's father figure has a role in forming his perception of himself. In *Fight Club*, Jack's father figure has given him trauma and the effects persist until his adulthood. This is also supported by (Hall, 1954) who says that traumatic experiences can come back as nightmares or flashbacks. The scene below happens the moment Tyler takes care of him during his recovery and he is about to leave him. When Tyler leaves him, this triggers Jack to have a flashback. Instead of seeing Tyler who leaves, he sees his father leaves him. This shows that Jack's traumatic experience still haunts him until this day. And this traumatic experience is classified as reality anxiety because the perception of danger comes from the external world (Hall, 1954). When his father left him, Jack is helpless about that and he cannot do anything to prevent his father from leaving him.



Figure 1 Jack lies in bed after car accident that leaves him traumatized
Fincher, D. (1999) *Fight Club* [DVD]. USA: Twentieth Century Fox.

In summary, Jack's reality anxiety is shown in his helplessness regarding his life satisfaction. He is not happy with his life and nothing in this world can make him happy. Jack's reality anxiety is a result of his traumatic experience when he was a child. It becomes traumatic because he is helpless when his father left him as he cannot prevent that from happening. This effect continues until his adulthood in the form of negative perception of himself, that is feeling rejected, insignificant, and unwanted as a child.

Jack's Neurotic Anxiety

Jack also has neurotic anxiety. One of the causes that result in Jack's anxiety is his insecurity. Jack's anxiety about his sexuality is manifested when he encounters Marla Singer whom he is sexually attracted to. Marla Singer is a girl whom Jack encounters at the support group. Just like him, she joins the support group as an impostor. Marla's physical appearance and attitude about life are different from common people's. She is presented as a seductive woman, her eccentric look and her careless attitude about life will catch people's attention, when he feels nervous every time he is around her. Her presence makes him feel uneasy and unable to concentrate on other things. Ever since Marla comes to the support group, he feels disturbed by her presence. He no longer enjoys the support group with her presence around. Even though Jack only meets her once, he cannot get her out of his mind. He keeps thinking of her and he wants to get rid of her to reduce his anxiety by splitting up the week so he can concentrate on the support group once again.



Figure 2 Jack lies awake on his bed because he cannot stop thinking about Marla
Fincher, D. (1999) *Fight Club* [DVD]. USA: Twentieth Century Fox.

This means that Jack perceives Marla as the source of his anxiety. According to Hall (1954) the source of dangers can be classified into two: the external world and the internal world. At first, it seems that the source of Jack's anxiety is located in the external world, which is Marla Singer. However, this is impossible since Marla does not show any dangerous nature. She is just an ordinary girl who happens to enter the same support group as Jack. This means Marla's presence serves only as a trigger, not as the cause. Instead of coming from the external world, Jack's perception of danger comes from his internal mind. Jack's anxiety toward Marla is caused by the pressure from the id. According to Hall (1954), the id consists of sexual impulses and aggressive impulses. The id works on the pleasure principle where it focuses on gratification. Marla's presence has triggered Jack's id and the id exerts pressure upon Jack's ego. Even though Jack has sexual attraction toward Marla, he does not release his sexual desire toward her. The cause for this inhibition is Jack's insecurity about his sexuality.

Jack's anxiety is classified as neurotic anxiety since it has something to do with his sexual impulse. Neurotic anxiety is a fear of being unable to control the impulsive action that comes from the id. This means the id which consists of either sexual or aggressive impulses plays an important role in Jack's anxiety. Although Jack does not admit that he is sexually attracted to Marla at first, it is shown that Jack is attracted to her at the end of the movie. Even though Jack has sexual attraction toward Marla, he does not release his sexual desire toward her. The cause for this inhibition is Jack's insecurity about his sexuality.

To sum up, there are two reasons why he feels insecure about his sexuality. The reasons are the unrealistic image of an ideal masculine promoted by advertisement and his unideal appearance. The first reason makes him feel insecure because he is far away from society's standards regarding masculinity. The second reason is his unideal appearance as the result of his lifestyle that does not help promote his manliness.

Jack's Moral Anxiety

Jack's last anxiety is moral anxiety. Moral anxiety is the feeling of guilt or shame because of transgressing society's ideal by not conforming to its value (Hall, 1954). First, Jack's moral anxiety can be seen in his anxiety toward public authority which is symbolized by his boss and the police. This is shown by the rigid gesture and tense feeling every time Jack encounters them. He is afraid when he has to deal with them even though he does not make any mistakes.

Second, Jack's moral anxiety can also be seen through his withdrawal from society. He knows that what he is doing is transgressing society's ideals. Therefore, he decided to move to a dilapidated area of town to reduce his feeling of shame. In the new house, it is only Jack and Tyler who live there. And because only Jack himself who lives there, he can be free to do anything he wants without having anxiety about society's judgment. Jack's withdrawal from society shows his moral anxiety because he wants to reduce his feeling of shame. The feeling of shame and guilt here is related to society's judgment. So, by withdrawing himself from society, he can escape from society's judgment and therefore this can reduce his anxiety.

Third, Jack's effort to conceal his shame means that he has moral anxiety. When something triggers his shame, he tries to conceal it by lashing out in anger so he can distract attention from himself. When someone tries to ask the thing that makes him ashamed, he reacts impulsively by attacking back the person who tries to expose his shame. This reaction is provoked by the feeling of shame that he wishes to get rid of. In the scene, it can be seen that fight club has triggered his feeling of shame that he does not want anybody to know about fight club. It can be seen that as soon as Jack is caught up, he impulsively tries to conceal the fight club because it triggers his feeling of shame. Because of feeling ashamed, he reacts by lashing out in anger toward his boss by snapping away the paper from his boss. He does this so that he can distract his boss's attention and reduce his feeling of shame.

Because of the fight club's immoral nature, this gives moral anxiety to Jack since he has transgressed society's ideals. After engaging in fight club, Jack can break free from society by doing the opposite of what society has taught him. For the sake of fight club, it is seen that he abandons what society thinks is morally good. He does this by quitting his previously stable job and lifestyle, and moves to a dilapidated town area with his alter ego. He does this to avoid punishment from society because of engaging in fight club. It is seen that his boss and his coworkers begin to disapprove of him since he joins the fight club. After he is involved in the fight club, he faces a lot of disapproval because of his beaten face. He comes to work with a bruised face and messy look from fighting. His boss and coworker throw a hostile and disapproving facial expression for his unpresentable appearance. And because of this rejection, Jack decides to quit his job, move to a dilapidated town area, live in alienation so he can have a fight club freely without society's judgment.



Figure 3 Jack moves to his new house.
Fincher, D. (1999) *Fight Club* [DVD]. USA: Twentieth Century Fox.

In conclusion, Jack's moral anxiety involves Jack's feeling of shame and guilt relating to his involvement in Fight Club. He is aware that Fight Club transgresses society's ideal because of

its value that is considered bad in society. Jack's moral anxiety is shown by his rigid gesture when he encounters public authority, his withdrawal from society, and his effort to conceal his feeling of shame. His moral anxiety is motivated by his desire to break free from society's conformity to gain freedom.

The Defense Mechanisms for Jack's Anxieties

In this part, I would like to analyze Jack's defense mechanisms for his anxiety using Freud's defense mechanism of the ego. According to Hall (1954), defense mechanisms of the ego are unhealthy ways to deal with anxiety because they can distort someone's perception of reality. "The defense mechanisms of the ego are irrational ways of dealing with anxiety because they distort, hide, or deny reality and hinder psychological development" (Hall, 1954, p. 96). There are several defense mechanisms of the ego. Those are repression, projection, reaction formation, fixation, and regression. (Hall, 1954) In this part, I will identify all of Jack's defense mechanisms which are repression, fixation, and regression.

Jack's Repression

Repression is the main defense mechanism that Jack uses for his anxieties. He uses this defense mechanism for all of his anxieties -- those are his insecurity, his desire to break free, and his traumatic experience of his father's abandonment. According to Hall (1954), "The purpose of repression is to abolish objective, neurotic, or moralistic anxiety by falsifying the existence of the external or internal threat to the ego's safety" (p.86).

First, Jack has repressed his sexual desire because of his insecurity. His insecurity makes him anxious if he releases his sexual desire. Thus, he uses repression to get rid of the uncomfortable feeling. His repression also caused him to deny his sexual desire toward her. He repeatedly does not want to admit that he likes her. He tries to deny that by showing a cold and rigid gesture every time he is around her. He shows the opposite emotion of his sexual feeling toward Marla. He tries to appear that he never likes Marla. The scene below is when Jack is being asked whether he has sexual attraction toward Marla, and this prompts his disgust reaction. The scene happens after the night he was just having sex with her through his alter ego, but just one day after that he completely disown his sexual experience with her.

Second, Jack has repressed his moral anxiety and this has led him to create project mayhem, a terrorist act aiming at destroying big corporations. His moral anxiety has caused him to have aggression which he should repress. The reason why he should repress his aggression is because it is unacceptable to society. If he releases his aggression which is in the form of hatred toward society, he would face disapproval from society. So, he represses his aggression in order to reduce his moral anxiety. However, his repression has influenced his behavior. His repressed aggression has caused him to create Project Mayhem, a terrorist organization which aims to destroy society by targeting big corporations.

Third, Jack uses repression for his traumatic experience. He represses his traumatic memories because it gives him a painful feeling of being rejected and unwanted. His repression has led him to self-destructive behavior. He does this through fight club, a club where men fight each other. Even though he thinks that he is fighting somebody (Tyler Durden), it turns out that he is beating himself.

Jack's Fixation

Jack does not only use repression as his defense mechanism, he also uses fixation in order to deal with his anxieties. According to Hall (1954) fixation occurs because one is afraid to take the next step. The reason for the fear is the perception of hardships that one will endure if one takes the next step. Jack's fixation is seen when he talks about marriage. It's normal for

someone his age to step into marriage, but he chooses not to. He refuses to step into marriage because of his perception regarding marriage. He does not think that he is ready for marriage and this shows Jack's fixation at a certain age. The scene below shows Jack's inhibition to get married because of his fixation. Jack's fixation is related to his insecurity. He thinks that he is ready to step into marriage with his condition. In here both Jack and Tyler are talking about normal people's stages of life which includes working and getting married.

Jack's fixation is also shown in his perception of hardship about marriage. He has a bad view about marriage that makes him insecure to step into marriage. He sees marriage as something that is filled with problems. This is shown by his complaint about how Tyler and Marla remind him of his parents. It is also noted that Jack's parents do not have successful marriages.

Jack's Regression

Another defense mechanism Jack uses is regression. Regression reduces anxiety by reverting to an earlier level of development. When someone is overwhelmed by fear, an adult may use child-like behavior in order to feel more secure. Regressive behavior can look like crying, sucking thumbs, bedwetting, etc.

Apart from repression, Jack is also seen to use regression. He is frustrated with his anxieties, and he is behaving like a child-like to reduce his anxieties. He does this by hugging and crying just like a child. Through the support group, he can cry in Bob's chest. This act is successful in reducing his anxieties as he keeps coming back to the support group to find relief. The scene below shows Jack's relief through crying in Bob's chest. When Jack hugs Bob, it represents a child who hugs his mother. After Jack cries, he can find relief, and it reduces his insomnia. Even though he is not sick like other members of the support group, it gives him an opportunity to cry and release his emotion regarding his frustration about his insomnia. It is proven that by using regression he can reduce his anxieties. It helps his insomnia and he can sleep again.

CONCLUSION

Based on my analysis on *Fight Club*, I conclude that Jack's anxiety is not merely caused by the danger in reality, which is often called reality anxiety. It can also happen inside Jack's mind even if there is no actual danger in the external world. This kind of anxiety can be categorized into two, namely, neurotic anxiety and moral anxiety. In overcoming his anxieties Jack develops his defense mechanisms. They are repression, fixation, and regression. In *Fight Club*, Jack possesses three types of anxiety, those are reality anxiety, neurotic anxiety, and moral anxiety. His anxieties have caused him to struggle in his life despite the perfect and normal life he has. On the surface, viewers only notice the mental symptoms that arise from his anxieties, which are in the form of insomnia and depression. But these mental symptoms do not just exist, rather they have underlying causes which can be found through analysis. After analyzing the movie, I find out the types for Jack's anxieties, those are Jack's neurotic anxiety as manifested in his insecurity, Jack's moral anxiety as manifested in his desire to break free, and Jack's reality anxiety as manifested in his traumatic experiences of being abandoned by his father.

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