Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

A living essential is knowing who one really is or what one really wants. In fact, most of us live without existential awareness; we go to school and college, then get a good job, and consider our goals fulfilled. While some people are contented with such patterned lives, others find them boring and, therefore, try to find something personally meaningful or at least exciting. They do so because they believe that one must search for self-identity because it is vital and can lead to self-awareness, self-determination, and eventually self-fulfillment. The process of self-identification is, hence, crucial for human development.

Throughout history, literature has dealt with the issue of self-identification. However, it was in the twentieth century that this topic has become a focus of the writing circle. Among literary works of this theme, **Fight Club**, a recent novel-turned-film written by Chuck Palahniuk, is remarkable in its intriguing and challenging presentation of self-identification. It portrays that people who suffer identity crisis often lack self-identification. The author suggests that identity crisis originates from four factors: psychological needs, an absence of a role model, spiritual loss, and social changes.

According to Abraham Maslow (quoted in Allen, 2000 : 227), human needs range from physical to psychological needs. Among psychological needs, that for self-actualization is the most important of all. Eric Fromm (quoted in Allen, 1994: 188) agrees that people have "existential needs" to make life meaningful, and self-identity is fundamental for the sense of being unique. As such, self-identity gives a

person self-worth, dignity and, most importantly, the purpose in life as well as energy to live on.

The need for a role model is also significant because it provides guidance for one's behavior in society. Without good role models, particularly one's father or mother, one tends to drift without direction in life. Usually children look up to parents as role models. The absence of parental guidance, thus, can confuse their children's perception of their personal role, and this problem might continue for the rest of their life.

Besides psychological needs and an absence of a role model, spiritual loss can seriously affect one's state of being. This problem can be traced back to the Age of Reason during the eighteenth century, when religion and the church started to lose their power. People's main interests since then have been shifted to worldly affairs. As Surapeepan Chatrapon remarks, "for many people, getting on in this world was more important than getting to heaven; indeed, success began to be equated with virtue" (2003 : 85). Following Charles Darwin's theory of Evolution and the industrial revolution, more and more attention was focused on material growth.

Such materialistic tendency has been increasingly prevalent over the centuries. Since the nineteenth century, the rapid growth of mass production in the United States has served the need of customers throughout the country, with "chain stores spread across the country" (Divine, et al, 1999 : 564-565). Sears, Roebuck and Montgomery Ward have sold their products via mail-order catalogs. Advertisements were posted in the newspapers in order to sell more products. As a result, "advertising, brand names, chain stores, and mail-order houses brought Americans of all varieties into a national market." Although the customers were from various ethnic backgrounds, "they were yet purchasers of nearly the same goods…. They buy similar clothes, furniture, and implements" (Divine, et al, 1999 : 564-565). Later on, *laissez faire* in businesses changed into capitalism in which the owners of giant businesses have become the controllers of the market, and materialism has prevailed (Divine, et al,

1999 : 576). People have been encouraged to pay more attention to materials rather than to their spirituality. This has resulted in spiritual emptiness, anxiety, and the feeling of meaninglessness.

The last factor depicted in this novel concerns social changes. In particular, the feminist movement of the 1970's has greatly affected male identity and masculinity. Men are no longer considered as strong and smart leaders for passive and weak women. Women have become stronger and have developed an ability to do things previously considered manly in the realms of work and sports. As a result, men cannot be sure of their proper social roles.

A direct consequence of all the changes is that self-identity has been vague, and self-identification has become more and more complex. This is particularly true in the twentieth century, when mass media and consumerism dominated people's self-identification process. In response, more people have paid attention to their search for self-identity. In fact, the literary themes of the loss and the search for identity relates to many other important issues presented in various ways such as double identity or split personality, social pressure to conform and rebellions.

In the nineteenth century, some European writers raised the issue of self-identification through the presentation of the double, the doppelganger or the dark side of human beings, or split personality which is "a condition in which a person has two very different ways of behaving" (Leech and Thomas, 1995 : 1018). It is usually related to schizophrenia, "a disorder of the mind marked by a separation of a person's mind and feeling, causing at last a drawing away from other people into a life in the imagination only" (Leech and Thomas, 1995 : 933). McConnell and Philipchalk (1974 : 495), however, believe that split personality is a rarer type of disorder which has nothing to do with schizophrenia.

In 1815, E.T.A. Hoffmann, a German writer, became well-known for his first novel about the doppelganger, **The Devil's Elixir**. The theme of the double was, however, much better-known in **The Double** (1846) by the Russian writer Fyodor

Dostoyevsky (Cornog and Doherty, 1997 : 148-149). Eight years later, the Scottish author, Robert Louis Stevenson, dramatizes the theme of the double on the split personality of Dr. Jekyll in **The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde**. This novel depicts a fight between good and evil ("Overall Analyses", 2003 : 1-3).

In the early twentieth century, writers became aware of the growth of industry and business and their effect on people's lives. Dissatisfaction in life and society was shown in the two novels **Main Street** and **Babbitt** by Sinclair Lewis, which demonstrate how conformity restricts an individual's identity. Carol Kennicott, the protagonist in **Main Street** is discontented with the town she lives in. She finds nothing interesting because everything in the town is exactly the same as those in other towns. The streets here are just like those everywhere else in America. Carol, therefore, tries to "reform the town by re-educating the people", but she fails. Like Carol, George F. Babbitt, the conformist in **Babbitt** attempts to rebel against the social values after realizing that his life as a businessman is very boring, but he also fails: "He finds that when he is free, he is nothing at all". Babbitt, hence, returns to his former conformist position (High, 1987 : 121-123). Notably, neither of them succeeds in acting against the traditional set of values.

Another treatment of the theme of self-identification is in **A Clockwork Orange** (1964) by English author Anthony Burgess. Alex, the group leader of the young in this novel has done so many "evil things", primarily irrational violent acts. After that he is arrested and cured by the electric shock to stop his wicked action, and become "good", but unhappy because he has lost his self-will he used to have. Burgess questions whether it is good for a person to do "good actions" while being deprived of freedom of choice (Roberts and Thornley, 1984 : 153).

Literary works also show the impact of educational institution on identity loss. School is considered an influential institution that shapes the youth's identity. Here, students are indoctrinated by the prescribed educational process. Schools does not only give knowledge and open a new world to students, but also take

away the students' freedom and limit their creativity. This issue is illustrated in **Dead Poets Society**, a novel by N.H. Kleinbaum, which is an inspiration to many readers, especially the youth, to dare to explore their own paths and be different. In this novel which was later made into film, Mr. Keating, the new English teacher in a very strict boyschool called Welton, urges the students to look for their own identity as follows:

> "Lads, there is a great need in all of us to be accepted, but you
>
> must trust what is unique or different about yourself, even if
>
> it is odd or unpopular. As Frost said,
>
> 'Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
>
> I took the one less traveled by,
>
> And that has made all the difference.' " (Kleinbaum, 1989 : 87)

Here, Mr. Keating, quotes Robert Frost's poem to inspire his students to find their own answers to their questions about life and to be aware of their self-worth. It does not matter what the outcome is, as long as it gives a person an opportunity to seek his/her own way.

While the above literary works illustrate various attempts to search for self-identity, none reveals the vivid contemporary search so succinctly as **Fight Club**. This novel explores the narrator's inner self by concretely presenting it as a double or a split personality, while strongly criticizing the postmodern society which is the outcome of the growth of industrialization.

Although **Fight Club** is reminiscent of **The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde**, the presentation of the dark side or the split personality in **Fight Club** is more realistic. Hyde is created by Dr. Jekyll's experiment whereas Tyler, the personified dark side comes into existence from the narrator's unconscious mind. Besides, this American contemporary novel criticizes and satirizes the materialistic society in the late twentieth century. The protagonist's reaction to his identity crisis is

so striking that many readers find it unconventional and remarkable in its content even though it superficially seems to be about fighting and violence. In searching for his identity, Palahniuk's narrator, one of the "double" protagonists, attempts to break all the rules and bring out his dark side, the side that most people try to hide.

In his novel, Palahniuk turns the American mundane life into something funny, exciting, strange and terrible. What he presents in his text is not new in our life: a boring job and a routined life, conflicts within ourselves and with other people, our consumption behavior or instincts. Yet, we observe in his depiction what we think about but are afraid to speak out loud, or even try to escape.

The opening scene in **Fight Club** occurs in the Parker-Morris Building, where the nameless narrator, the protagonist, is describing the very last minute in his life. Tyler Durden, another protagonist, is putting a gun in the narrator's mouth while consoling him not to be afraid of death. Then the narrator takes the readers back to what has happened from the very beginning. The narrator works as a recall campaign coordinator. He is bored with his job and endeavors to find a solution. At the same time, he suffers from insomnia. He goes to see a doctor and asks for some medicine but the latter suggests going to support groups to see the real pain. After crying in Big Bob's arms who has testicle cancer, the narrator recovers from insomnia. Then a girl named Marla Singer enters the support group and all the men feel intruded and the narrator becomes an insomniac again. He then gets to know Tyler and together with Tyler establishes Fight Club. The narrator gives up his luxurious life after his condominium has been exploded and moves in with Tyler.

With Tyler, the narrator experiences many outrageous situations. He starts to rebel by going to work with bloodstains all over his shirt. After Fight club becomes popular, Tyler invents Project Mayhem aiming to destroy civilization. The narrator disagrees with Tyler and he tries to stop this project. Tyler disappears and the narrator goes looking for him around the country. Finally, he finds out that Tyler is himself. In order to get rid of Tyler, he decides to shoot himself.

Related to self-identification, masculinity crisis is another important issue in **Fight Club**. Not only the narrator but also other male characters encounter the masculine crisis. Such situation reflects the contemporary situation in which several men have felt threatened, confused and worried. They do not know exactly how they should behave or what social roles they ought to assume.

Another significant feature of this novel is the postmodern lifestyle under the tremendous influence of mass communication and advertisement which control our consumption and affect our self-identification. Our consumption today tends to be dictated by the advertisement which mostly concerns "acceptable" appearance rather than the inner self. People have identified themselves with what they buy or have or with what they wear, without realizing what they truly need. As a result, the mass communication and advertisement can lead people to false identities (Sim, 2001 : 54-57). Such postmodern tendencies should be explored in detail for they affect the protagonist's identity problem.

Because the novel **Fight Club** has been put in film adaptation, it is necessary to study the issue of self-identification in both media. The fact that film adaptation of a novel is a disputable issue makes the comparison even more interesting. Some critics as well as practitioners such as the filmmaker Ingmar Bergman insist that "we should avoid making film out of books" (quoted in Beja, 1979 : 51). On the other hand, filmmaker Bela Balazs regards the "original book" as the "raw material to be worked with, rather than a sacred text to be copied" (quoted in Beja, 1979 : 82).

Film adaptation of **Fight Club** reflects some of the problem raised by the above critics. Beja (1979 : 82) states that basically there are probably two approaches in the adaptation. In the first, the adapters keep in mind that the originality of the novels has to be retained. On the other hand, in the other approach the adapters feel free to produce the film out of its origin so that they can create the work of art in a divergent medium.

This point, however, is inconclusive and the present study will investigate how the issue of self-identification is presented through both media. Even though the film adaptation of **Fight Club** is slightly different from the novel, it still maintains the same theme like "several other contemporary films that allow for an exploration of the issues of postmodernism, identity, consumerism…" (Nelmes, 2003 : 111).

The film adaptation of Fight Club, starring Brad Pitt, Edward Norton, along with Helena Bonham Carter, is directed by David Fincher and released in 1999. The outstanding feature of this film is not its famous cast, but its intriguing techniques in conveying the message which is so controversial that the Twentieth Century Fox had to delay its release (Abrams et al, 2001 : 39).

The enthusiastic reception of the audience was possibly due to its new perspectives on self-identification and the contemporary way of life. Therefore, the presentation of self-identification in both the novel and its film adaptation will be also examined in order to see the points of view of the two contemporary artists of the late twentieth century: the novelist Chuck Palahniuk and the film director, David Fincher. This approach will deepen our understanding of the fate of the postmodernists trapped in their own society.

Related Literature

This literature review covers three main topics: criticism on the novel **Fight Club**, criticism on the film of **Fight Club**, and self-identity in literature and film.

1. Criticism on the Novel of **Fight Club**

People hardly know that **Fight Club** was first published in the novel form before being adapted into a film. As a result, few critiques and analyses on the

novel of **Fight Club** are found. Relevant issues of the novel that have been analyzed are the use of the doppelganger, the impact of history, and absence of the father role model.

Michael Kegler (n.d. : 12) believes that Chuck Palahniuk uses the German popular literary technique in the nineteenth century of the doppelganger to create Tyler Durden in **Fight Club**. The doppelganger is originally invented to "mentally reconcile the painful dichotomies of human existence : life and death, day and night, male and female, or self and others" (Kermer quoted in Kegler, n.d. : 83). Later on in the Romantic era, the doppelganger refers to split personality. E.T.A. Hoffmann was a great influence in employing doppelganger this way (Tymns quoted in Kegler, n.d. : 9). This technique blurs the line between "fantasy and reality". Since Jack (Kegler's reference to the narrator in the film **Fight Club**) is an insomniac, it is hard to decide whether he is awake or still asleep. **Fight Club**, thus, is intentionally ambiguous. Jack's doppelganger, Tyler, leads the readers to believe that he is another character rather than Jack's split personality.

Eduardo A. Velasquez (2001 : 5) points out that Palahniuk urges his readers to be aware of "human attachment", to think of their own roots, of who and what they are at present, and that Palahniuk also suggests that their problem is caused by the connection between "human freedom" and history and "other kinds of inheritances" which have a great impact on becoming a person. Relating oneself to what happened in the past, one obeys social rules, tradition, and culture constructed in what has happened before and passed down for generations without thinking of one's own desire. Palahniuk's work indicates that history is not a tool for self-identification, but it is "the influence other human beings have upon us" (Velasquez, 2003 : 5). History brainwashes human beings and gives them false identities.

Nevertheless, in **Fight Club**, history is more complicated than what one thinks. Project Mayhem is created to "destroy every scrap of history", however, it is ironic that the opening scene is associated with "remembering" so that the narrator can

know what to destroy, while the end is related to "forgetting". The narrator has to recollect how he befriends with Tyler; otherwise he will not be able to eliminate Tyler at the end (Velasquez, 2001 : 15).

Krister Friday (2003 : 8) provides another perspective on history in **Fight Club**. She thinks history in this story cannot be neglected because the narrative is in a historical form-biography. According to Friday, it is "a narrative of identity" that recounts "a biographical flashback of male decline and re-emergence". The story shares the same beginning and end. This "retrospective structure" raises the question about the "relation between identity and history". The narrator's use of flashback is regarded as a kind of history, the result of the past and what shapes one's being in the present.

Friday further notes that the narrator has trouble seeking for his identity. Friday (2003 : 8) believes that men's anxiety in **Fight Club** occurs because with women's increasing roles they are afraid of not being involved in history. History, thus, plays an important role in identifying oneself. The narrator and Tyler want to be recognized as part of history so that they will be talked about. Recognition, according to Jacques Lacan (quoted in Friday, 2003 : 10), is "very crucial to the formation and support for identity". The frustration of not knowing the exact time they are in makes the narrator and Tyler struggle in "betweenness" which means they cannot separate the "boundaries between present, past and future". This situation is called "disjointure" (Derrida quoted in Friday, 2003 : 8).

Apart from the use of the doppelganger and the impact of history, another dominant topic in the criticism of the novel is the absence of father, which causes the narrator a great difficulty. Despite being an adult, Jack is still immature. Raised by his mother, he searches for a woman who can take care of him like his mother does, instead of a "partner or mate". He fails to have a normal relationship with a woman because his father has never advised him how to interact with women. The only female role he knows is the mother's. According to Bknickerbocker (2003 : 4) the

male role model can be regarded as God for the young men in "formative years". Since this narrator lacks a male role model, or his father, he can be viewed as being abandoned by God as well (Bknickerbocker, 2003 : 4). This interpretation sheds additional light to the narrator's identity crisis.

As discussed above, few critiques on the novel **Fight Club** directly focus on self-identity. Furthermore, while the technique of the doppelganger which is crucial in analyzing self-identity has been raised, it is not fully elaborated. So it is important to examine the self-identity issue in the film version of **Fight Club**.

2. Criticism on the Film of **Fight Club**

Since **Fight Club** is much better known as a film than the novel itself, the focus of many critics has been on the film version. Various topics are found in critiques, ranging from the most obvious to the surprising ones. This part of the review will concentrate on issues concerning identity crisis and relevant psychoanalytical studies.

The most outstanding theme in the film adaptation of **Fight Club,** according to some critics**,** is masculinity and male identity. Jill Nelmes (2003 : 273) claims that **Fight Club** conveys masculine crisis. It depicts what men in the late capitalism era and the late twentieth century have to confront. In this film, "the young white American man" is feminized, confused of his proper roles in society and cannot find meaning in life. In his identity crisis the narrator's dramatized split personality, Tyler Durden comes into existence. These two characters are associated with masculinity and consumerism. Tyler is the representative of the masculine man whereas the narrator, is a representative of the "passive and domesticated" man. Tyler is a fighter, a destroyer, and also an anti- consumerism figure. On the contrary, the narrator is preoccupied with IKEA furniture and other facilities, while experiencing alienation and deficient aspiration in work (Nelmes, 2003 : 273).

The fear of castration and losing masculine identity plays an important role in **Fight Club**. Tyler demonstrates the method of repossessing his masculinity to the narrator by establishing Fight Club, where pain and suffering are the signs of becoming the genuine man. This resembles the "past ritual of primitive societies", where male and female roles are apparently divided. In **Fight Club**, men obtain their masculinity again through pain. They have their own principles that give them a clear line between male and female roles (Nelmes, 2003 : 274).

In several criticisms on this film, Freudian theories are often mentioned. Kip Werking (n.d. : 4-16) proposes that Freudian theories about child development and the Oedipus Complex are related to self-identification. Fixation occurs to a child at the age of six, which is during the phallic stage when the psychosexual development of the narrator, who lacks the father role model, is ceased. Not having his father to give him advice about how to be a genuine man, the narrator's male identity and masculinity are vague. He identifies himself with the household facilities which are supposed to be of female interests. Moreover, he does not know how to interact with women. Consequently, the narrator looks for a surrogate father by creating Tyler. The narrator is, however, jealous of Tyler because Tyler is everything the narrator cannot be. This jealousy is worsened by the Oedipus Complex when the narrator knows that Tyler has sexual intercourse with Marla, who is assumed to be the narrator's substitute mother. The Oedipus Complex is gradually developed to the point when the narrator sees Tyler as his enemy and attempts to stop Tyler from making mischief until he finally kills him (Werking, n.d. : 4-16).

As seen in this review, women's increasing ability and power have significantly threatened male identity and masculinity. Besides, the characteristics of the narrator are analyzed by using psychological approaches based on Freud's theories. Among Freudian theories, there are some concepts that obviously relate to **Fight Club**, such as the unconscious or the interaction between id, ego, and superego, but the critic

Werking chooses the Oedipus Complex theory to interpret the narrator's characteristics.

3. Self-Identity in Literature and Film

The questions about self-identity are often found in literature because it is a universal issue. Outstanding works that deal with self-identity selected for a review here are **Heart of Darkness** by Joseph Canrad, **The Double** by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, **The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde** by Robert Louis Stevenson, all late nineteenth century novels. A popular comic strip of the late twentieth century, **Calvin and Hobbes**, the two films relating to this issue : **The Graduate** and **American Beauty** will be explored as well.

In these works, there are two major methods for finding one's identity. One is from travelling in the faraway land, and another one is creating the double or the split personality. In **Heart of Darkness,** the protagonist Marlow has an inner conflict and decides to travel to the jungle in Africa. This journey signifies the protagonist's exploration of his own psyche and what he truly wants. During his journey, he encounters difficulties which give him lessons in life and he can finally identify his need (Soison Sakolrak, 1994 : 25).

Two outstanding novels about finding oneself by inventing the double are **The Double** and **The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde**. The protagonists in both novels are discontented with themselves and their lifestyle. They, therefore, invent their double or split personality to compensate for their identity loss. Yakov Golyadkin in **The Double** is "uneducated" (Don, 2001 : 1) and "socially inept" (Hoenisch, 2000 : 1). He, hence, invents Golyadkin Junior who has everything Golyadkin lacks to be his double. In **The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde**, Dr. Jekyll, who lives within the Victorian social constraints, invents through his experiment Mr. Hyde, his opposite. Hyde breaks all the rules and does whatever he

wants. ("Overall Analyses", 2003 : 1). However, both novels end with the protagonist's realization that their doubles are not their true answers for self-identification. In **Fight Club**, the narrator also uses the doubles to find his self-identity but fails at the end.

The split personality in the comic strip **Calvin and Hobbes** is compared by Cleave (2003 : 1) to that presented in **Fight Club**. In this critique, the novel's narrator is the grown-up version of Calvin while Tyler is the grown-up version of Hobbes, Calvin's "imaginary" friend. Similarly, nobody but Calvin and the narrator themselves are able to see their own double (Cleave, 2003 : 1). Moreover, Calvin invents the club called G.R.O.S.S. (Get Rid of Slimy Girls), which is comparable to the narrator's anti-women Fight Club (Cleave, 2003 : 4).

The reviews on **The Graduate** and **American Beauty** center on the search for self-worth and meaning in life. Similar to the narrator in **Fight Club**, Benjamin Braddock in **The Graduate** and Lester Burnham in **American Beauty** find their lives meaningless and struggle to discover solution. Notably, Benjamin and Lester are unhappy with their lifestyle. Neither wants to follow the social conventions, but they cannot find an alternative, either. While Benjamin uses pool as his temporary sanctuary from reality, Lester decides to quit his boring job, rebels against his wife and becomes lively again when he falls in love with his daughter's friend (Barnett, 2002 : 1-2 and Beuka, 2000 : 1).

Even though the protagonists in these works fail to discover their identity and have only a glimpse of a new way of life and self-development, the theme of self-identification always captures the audience's attention. Following the journey toward self-identification, **Fight Club** in both forms of novel and film will, therefore, be examined in term of a search for self-identity in the last decade of the twentieth century.

Objectives

This research aims to explore in both novel and film of **Fight Club** the protagonist's identity crisis, his process of self-identification and self-realization. The effectiveness of the relevant presentation techniques used in both media will be explored, compared, and evaluated.

Significance of the Study

This research will yield insights about human behavior and social problems regarding personal identity, male crisis, and consumerism. It will lead to a better understanding of the process of self-identification and the resulted sense of self-worth which can help one to live meaningfully.

Limitations of the Study

1. This thesis will explore **Fight Club** in two versions: the novel by Chuck Palahniuk and the film directed by David Fincher.
2. The analysis of the novel and the film will base on psychological approaches, and other related theories.

Definition of Terms

Identity : "The need to be aware of oneself as a separate entity, and to sense oneself
       the subject of one's own actions" (Fromm quoted in Allen, 2000 : 445)

Identity crisis : "A period of inner conflict during which an individual examines his or
       her life and values and makes decision about life roles" (Erikson quoted in
       Huffman et al, 2000 : a6)

Self-actualization : "A principle of human behavior stating that individuals strive to develop their capacities and talents to the fullest—that is, growing and enhancing the basic self" (Bohart, Feshbach and Weiner, 1996 : 582)

Self-awareness : "The top level of consciousness; cognizance of the autobiographical character of personally experienced events" (Gerrig and Zimbardo, 1999 : G-10)

Self-determination : "The right or opportunity of individuals to control their own fates" (Leech and Thomas, 1995 : 1066)

Self-identity : "The way we think about ourselves and construct unifying narratives of the self" (Barker, 2002 : 391) or the continuity of self over past, present, and future that results from the operation of memory" (Allen, 2000 : 456)

Self-identification : The self-discovering in order to find out who one is and know one's true desire and aim in life.

Self-realization : "The complete development or fulfillment of the self's potential" (Morris, 1973 : 1177)

Research Methodology

The self-identification in both the novel and the film will be explored by using relevant critical approaches. Key presentation techniques of both media will then be investigated in order to evaluate their comparative effectiveness.