

Art of Storytelling: A Study of Chuck Palahniuk's Literary Techniques

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Abstract

Charles Michael Palahniuk was born on February 21, 1962 in Pasco, Washington into a poor family. One of the renowned contemporary American novelists he has attained much critical acclaim as a writer of fiction. Palahniuk's first attempted long novel *If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home Already* was not only unsuccessful with publishers who generally refer to it as "800 pages of garbage", but also the fact that woman who run the workshop that Palahniuk used to attend to improve his writing skills asked him to stop attending as some group members just felt unsafe with him in the workshop. Instead, she suggested him a workshop known as "Dangerous writing" run by Tom Spanbauer, who at last directed Palahniuk's writing towards its current form. Under Spanbauer's direction, Palahniuk stepped from the "many-worded" writing to a much more rationalized, minimalistic form, which led to Palahniuk's first few short stories which were published in magazines.

KEYWORDS: Repetition, Minimalism, Recording angel, Writing on the body, Tom Spanbauer.

ANALYSIS

After completing his B.A. in journalism from the University of Oregon, Palahniuk started working for a newspaper, covering many things right from school board meetings to murders, but he finally grew tired of it and started new job as a car mechanic, rarely writing about car-repairs. During these years he was trying to live the most exploratory and adventurous life, living in many cheap flats with his friends and drinking, driving, reading and playing endless pranks on strangers. Many of such adventures with his friends from these years were fictionalised into his novels, either as a motivation (for example, 'Project Mayhem' in *Fight Club* is a reworked, more vicious version of Disharmony Society in which Palahniuk participated) or as literary adaptations of the real events. Realising the fact it was time to do something good to life, Palahniuk took two vital steps that finally turned out to be defining steps for his career – firstly, he started working as an unpaid helper for incurably ill patients, encountering death and the brutal reality of the lives of people inexorably resembling death on the daily basis. This kind of experience predictably changes the way a person's perception both living and dying, but in this case also feeds Palahniuk's imagination to use the malicious reality of support groups as a vital structural factor of *Fight Club* and later also *Choke*. Moreover, he states that he uses his novels as a vehicle of dealing with the harsh realities of life and this occurrence made him face these realities constantly and thus helped him work out the techniques how to fight the elements that paralysed them. Secondly, and more significantly, he moved from writing just to keep his mind engaged while waiting for spare parts to actual attending a writers' workshop.

So far the writing technique is taken into consideration, MacKendrick comments, as “Dangerous writing” techniques which Tom Spanbauer teaches in the already mentioned workshop. They are portrayed in Palahniuk’s essay “Not Chasing Amy” in the collection *Stranger than Fiction: True Stories* (2004, titled *Non-Fiction in the United Kingdom & Australia*). First of the tricks he talk about is “horses” which is Spanbauer’s secret code word for choruses. These are indivisible part of every Palahniuk’s novel: short phrases and formulas repetitive with small changes every once in a while both unite the swift plot and, at the same time, slowly build the main theme of the story. To include just few examples of “horses”, we may use some notorious rules of *Fight club*, “Sorry Mom, Sorry God”, fashion magazine-like “Jump to ...” and “Give me [smile, sexi, amnesia, new parents, etc.]. Flash.” throughout *Invisible Monsters* (1999) or “These [sound-oholics, quiet-ophobics, etc.]” and repeated class-action lawsuit ads throughout *Lullaby* (2002) – these are just a small amount of of the motives that Palahniuk regularly repeats, using diverse ones for every novel.

Repetition is a incident that “permeates nature, human life, the various arts (music, painting, dance, literature) and many disciplines (philosophy, psychoanalysis, history, education, communication theory, linguistics, poetics)” (Rimmon-Kenan 151), where it provides various functions. Ingrained in the pre-textual and pre-oral cultures, repetition used to be a primary constituent of communication, learning and entertainment and in many ways it conserves this function even in contemporary world. In literature the smaller prescribed repetitions, like the choruses Palahniuk uses, are apt and soothing, while longer repetitions of prototypes tend to offer an annotation. By repeating the style and prototypes the writer is able to set up some sort of ritual with the audience. Palahniuk commented on choruses as: “I use choruses, because human beings use choruses . . . We do this. We sort of create these little landmark phrases that mark shared experience with each other” (“Agony Column interview – 2005”). This feeling of joint experience makes him to establish a bond between the text and its audience. In the same interview, he talked about more purposes of these repeated choruses “It’s a way of acknowledging previous plot points . . . you turn them into a chorus or a phrase and then you just refer back to all the emotions of that previous moment with that really short phrase. Human being do it, so I do it in my writing” (“Agony Column interview – 2005”). The repetition, in this case, provide as another instrument converting the experience of real world interpersonal statement into a written book as previously mentioned, one of the milestone advances Palahniuk uses in his writing style. In the afterword of the republished version of *Fight Club*, Palahniuk comments that in his first books choruses were used mostly as a sign of leaping to a new angle of the novel and embrace the aspects together without disturbing the audience too much. “A bland kind of buffer that would be a touchstone or landmark a reader would need to not feel lost. A kind of neutral sorbet, like something served between courses in a fancy diner. A signal, like buffer music in radio broadcasts, to announce the next topic. The next jump” (*Fight Club* 213). He clearly managed to find more suitable feature of the choruses by using this technique in the following works and although his writing style was slowly changing, the “horses” appear very obviously in each of his fictions throughout the whole writing profession.

Another significant technique Palahniuk talks about in the essay is “recording angel”, meaning reporting without open judging or commentary, which, again, obviously,

reminds of journalistic writing and Hemingway's "iceberg theory. He explains: "Nothing is fed to the reader as 'fat' or 'happy.' You can only describe actions and appearances in a way that makes a judgment occur in the reader's mind. Whatever it is, you unpack it into the details that will reassemble themselves within the reader" (Stranger 144). In one of the online conference he himself acknowledges that journalism studies had enabled him to employ this technique successfully: "Studying journalism is the same quest for objectivity so "recording angel" came a little easier to me than it does a lot of writers" ("Washington Post – Lullaby"). Palahniuk uses this technique at length and usually tends to keep away from mounting up adjectives even when unfolding a scene or exposing a new character. He defines the condition in short, offering an important evocative aspect for spectators to create the picture for themselves. For example, at the beginning of *Invisible Monsters* he mentions a scene at a wedding where home is set on fire and bride who is a fashion model kills another model with a shotgun. Protagonist Shannon, a former model and a close friend of both abovementioned characters, watches the state, the blood stain expensive suit jacket, and confesses: "It's not that I'm some detached lab animal just conditioned to ignore violence, but my first instinct is maybe it's not too late to dab club soda on the bloodstain" (13). This is the first line by which Palahniuk characterizes Shannon and the state of mind of a woman whose whole life consisted of bragging about expensive cloths. This is the way he is able not only to introduce a character in as few words as possible, but also achieves more legitimacy with a person who reads his novels. Steve White explains why this is more successful than providing thorough portrayal of both her looks and mentality:

If you tell the readers something, they've no reason to believe you. But if you 'show,' if you describe the details of your story's reality as a 'recording angel' or a 'transparent eyeball,' the readers will draw their own conclusions. And you'll have tremendous authority as an author. Because readers will always believe their own conclusions. ("Novel Dog")

This participation of the audience is moreover reinforced by including the audience in the novel itself by the way of metafiction. Again, the very beginning of *Invisible Monsters* can be used as an example. The novel begins with: "Where you're supposed to be is some big West Hills wedding reception in a big manor house with flower arrangements and stuffed mushrooms all over the house. This is called scene setting: where everybody is, who's alive, who's dead" (11). Although Palahniuk replaces tangible evocative adjectives with words like "some big" and breaks the old literary conventions by addressing audience directly and naming the literary feature itself in a way of post-modern literature, he is able to make a authentic background by not directly forcing the audience to imagine it precisely the way it is mainly accepted for them. The same way of addressing the reader is commonly utilized throughout *Fight Club*: famously for example in the recipes for home-made explosives ("Mix the nitro with sawdust, and you have a nice plastic explosive" (12) or when just generally referring to social reality of the reader ("You do the little job you're trained to do. Pull a lever. Push a button" (12)).

Another technique to involve a reader Palahniuk mentions in "Not Chasing Amy" is "writing on the body" or evoking a physical response in the reader, involving them "on a gut level" – "You don't have to hold the reader by both ears and ram every moment

down their throat. Instead, story can be a succession of tasty, smelly, touchable details” (Stranger 145). This technique works on a very similar principle as the principle before, but the details are purposely aimed at fuelling reader’s imagination in connection with their own body. Example from *Fight Club*: “With a gun stuck in your mouth and barrel of the gun between your teeth, you only talk in vowels” (13). This kind of an unusual detail forces the reader to process it, apply it on their own body and thus create an emotional reaction, even if unconsciously. In this essay, Palahniuk does not mention another element that has become a trademark of his writing – factoids. Shortly formulated facts with often hardly provable reliability can be found randomly included in each of his novels. They are situated seemingly at random and usually provide trivial information from history, nature or science that relate to the content of a particular novel. In *Fight Club* it is the recipes for explosions, *Survivor* includes tips for home chores, in *Snuff* it is sex-related trivia from history and various facts from history of Hollywood, in *Diary* it is factoids from history of art, etc. Though most of the information can barely be confirmed and in many cases might seem unbelievable, the author claims that they are true at least up to his knowledge: “My journalist's bogey is that if I'm going to use it as a non-fictional device, it has to be true, as far as I can research it. All the trivia is true” (“A.V. Club interview”). Several years after this claim, he, however, confessed to inventing some of the facts in later novels. Palahniuk uses these pieces of information not only to entertain, but also to strengthen the connection between the book and reality and thus enable the reader to relate to it. MacKendrick comments on this technique in his essay: “When he incorporates facts into his novels they present historical or scientific details that key the reader into a stable world” (MacKendrick 11). Palahniuk employs this technique not only through the factoids. In many of his novels he includes references to actual places, people and events in order to set the narrative as firmly in reality as possible and make the invented story more veritable. “In a way, I want to make the incredible plausible by burying it in non-fiction stuff. Make the little tiny details all true, so people will believe the really big, outlandish stuff” (“A.V. Club interview”). This approach plays an important role for example in novels *Rant* and *Tell-All*.

All these techniques together contribute to an ultimate goal of minimalism – to tell more by writing less. “Less becomes more. Instead of the usual flood of general details, you get a slow drip of single-sentence paragraphs, each one evoking its own emotional reaction” (Stranger 145). MacKendrick sees this fast-paced writing as a functional means for literature that has to compete with video games and the Internet. He, again, parallels Palahniuk with New Journalists who had to compete with television and electronic media, but as these have been around for several decades by now, it is time to gear up and keep the tempo with the technological development.

The preference of fast and short forms is apparent also in the structure of the novels themselves – Palahniuk’s writing is obviously very short story based. Individual chapters usually stand for separate episodes and might remind reader of several short stories linked into a novel. This is the case mostly in *Haunted* (2005), which is literally a collection of various short stories linked together by a framing story of the people who tell these short stories, but most of his novels fall into a similar pattern, even if less obviously. There are several reasons why short stories are an important element of his fiction. Firstly, it was the literary form that enabled him to be published as he found it

impossible to find a publisher with his imperfect lengthy first novel. Moreover, after having several of the short stories published he found out that he can easily write bridging scenes to link these stories into actual novels, which were much easier to sell to an agent as long as several of their chapters have already been successfully published in literary magazines. He continued with this practice even with his later novels when he did not have to struggle to find a publisher and readership. He carries on regularly writing and publishing short stories even nowadays. On several occasions he claimed: "Short stories have always been really my highest priority." ("Speech at Grub Street writer conference").

Another, more important reason, is obviously Tom Spanbauer's influence. It was under his guidance that Palahniuk moved from eight-hundred-paged novels to seven-page-long short stories. On one of the public readings Palahniuk presented Spanbauer's teaching philosophy:

If you can't do it in seven pages, you sure as hell can't do it in seven hundred.' So seven pages was the ideal length for a story. And seven pages, I could keep that hidden at work and I could pull that out and line edit it in work at any time I wanted to. You could put seven pages underneath a track manual and no one will ever find it. ("Speech at Grub Street writer conference")

This way he could carry on writing even when in work, just to keep his mind occupied during the long breaks between individual repairs, working on short stories and carefully editing them the way they would constantly hold the attention of other members of the workshop for whom he had to read them aloud, which was another Spanbauer's strategy how to analyze a story. All the stories had to be short enough to be read aloud in full and analyzed word after word. This way the students were able to both keep the story "dangerously" dynamic and pay full attention to every word. Concerning the function and benefits of reading the work aloud Palahniuk stated in an interview:

By reading out loud you instantly find out where you've overwritten, where the energy starts to fade. [...] I know the purpose of each sentence and in the workshop where I started Tom Spanbauer would stop us and would say 'Ok, why did you chose that word?' And at any point in your presentation you might be stopped and forced to make a case for even the smallest aesthetic choices. So you really had to reason them out even before you put them on the page. ("Agony Column Interview 2010")

This practice pushed Palahniuk's writing style even closer to imitation of the oral forms of presentation, as he was advised earlier on. Moreover, with these readings occasionally taking place in various sports bars or pool halls, he regularly had a chance to confront his writing with laic general public, who do not usually care for literature at all. Minimalistic approach obviously proved to be a tool that allows to produce literature that is successful also with this kind of a (non-)reader. And that applies not only through the aforementioned techniques, but also through the general simplicity of the structure. On one of the public readings Palahniuk commented on minimalism and its structure:

You really keep your elements really paired down. [...] You do the very most you can do with very minimal number of elements. And this includes your objects as well as your characters and your settings. That instead of introducing new things ongoingly and loosing energy every time you have to lapse into description of this another new thing, you keep things simple so that things acquire greater sort of energy as you see them again and again in different circumstances. (“Chuck Palahniuk: Tell-All”)

This excerpt, which provides yet another explanation to the aforementioned issue of repetition, may be used to sum up Palahniuk’s minimalistic clinging to shortness and dynamics as key technical elements of writing serving to make his writing more accessible and attractive to broader body of readers. Again, this approach might be considered to be post-modern in its nature as it directly opposes to the pre-modern literary tendency to use the literature as a tool for distinguishing the “art-enabled” elite from the “art-challenged” rest. For this reason we may classify the formal aspects of his writing as non-artistic based on the classical criterions. On the other hand, Palahniuk never claimed to have any artistic tendencies, but he expressed a desire to write novels that would bring the young ones back to reading and this precise form proved to be successful means for fulfilling this wish.

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