

The Cult of Violence in Anthony Burgess's 'A Clockwork Orange'

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'A Clockwork Orange' is set in a soulless, technological future Britain of advanced urban decay. What do we know about this world? The exact time is not mentioned, all we are told is that there had been already men on the moon and a letter dated to 1960 is regarded to be 'starry' - or in plain English: old.

The first problem we have to face when reading this novel is its language. In the beginning it is very difficult to understand, even if we have learnt Russian before, because it is full of slang and made up words, but after a while we can find out the meanings of the unknown expressions from the context. This gives the reader the pleasure of decoding and creates a weird atmosphere at the same time. Russian is the language of the former Soviet Union, so if you have ever heard about Stalin you will understand the reason for its usage in this anti-utopia.

The closest 'relatives' of the novel are Orwell's 1984 and Huxley's Brave New World, but Burgess was less concerned about politics than his fellow-writers. He was actually inspired by the violent behaviour of some teenage groups in the early Sixties (teddy boys, mods, skinheads). Although he wanted to express his feelings against these 'antics', his book and Kubrick's film became a cult, especially favoured by the following aggressive youth movement: punk.

Burgess's hero, Alex is an extremely contradictory person. On the one hand he is really intelligent and he prefers classical music, on the other hand he is cruel and he does not have any morale at all. He is quite a dangerous criminal but also a child, his parents' only son (only fifteen years-old !)

We might say that he is sympathetic and repulsive at the same time.

His murderous violence in the first part of the novel is partly validated as a deliberate act of rebellion against an especially numbing social 'machine'. (This 'bored

teenager'-attitude is a very characteristic feature of the punk subculture). He and his 'droogs' are beating up people just for fun, because there is nothing else to do. Violence here becomes entertainment: they do not believe in anything and do not pay respect to anybody. It might be worth mentioning here that the hero's name Alex can be understood as "lawless", since 'lex' means 'law' in Greek and the 'a' is an affix meaning 'without'.(2)

Alex stresses that his delinquency is entirely a matter of free choice of evil, of deliberate self assertion: "what I do I do because I like to do".(3) This is one of the most important philosophic questions in this novel. Where are the limits of the individual's freedom? Do we have the right to destroy other people's lives? The answer to this latter question is obviously no. But the extremity of Alex's behaviour makes us think it over again. Can we live ignoring morale? A lot of people can, certainly. And while reading the novel we have to identify with Alex. We commit all the crimes he does and we have to realize that the evil is inside us, even if we have always managed to keep it under control. It seems to be romantic somehow to break the law, to do something irreversible. Everybody has had such thoughts, even though we seldom talk about it. (The film 'Natural Born Killers' was based on the same idea.)

The contrast between his phase of automatic goodness and his earlier nature, free and evil, establishes with more than sufficient clarity the novel's central questions (recalling some of Milton's interest in 'Paradise Lost'): "Does God want goodness or the choice of goodness? Is a man who chooses the bad perhaps in some way better than a man who has the good imposed upon him?"(p. 76) To communicate such questions effectively, the 'man who chooses the bad' must be presented in a way which avoids simply repelling readers' sympathy.

The most dramatic scene of the novel is the rape on F. Alexander's wife. Burgess himself had a very similar experience and if we think about the coincidences between the names and that F. Alexander is working on a book called 'A Clockwork Orange' some other questions have to be answered. Who is F. Alexander and what is his role? We know that Alex's destiny is to meet him once again. The former victim has to help the former assassin. The two characters are complementary: F. Alexander is peaceful, mature and wise, but blind in a way, while Alex is aggressive but more down-to-earth. After he recognizes Alex he will be prevented from taking revenge, first by his partners in the conspiracy,

then by
the government, which proves the fact that he is a permanent loser. We
might
say that F. Alexander is the author himself as he sees himself in a
very
critical way. He is so good that he is simply incapable of living.

There is
also, more sinisterly, an Orwellian aspect of authoritarian social
control in
the novel.(4) Part Two shows Alex brainwashed by new penal techniques,
including sickening films of Nazi violence, which leave him "committed
to
socially acceptable acts, a little machine capable only of good"(5)
This
change is worse than death for Alex. The only meaning of his life was
destruction and violence.

Part Three is
the ordeal of Alex. The world he had felt at home in changed. The
statue of the
Dignity of Labour has been cleaned up, the lift is working . Someone
has even
taken his place in his parents' flat. He meets all his victims and
enemies one
by one: the old man at the 'Biblio', Dim and Billyboy, who became
policemen and
finally F. Alexander. The roles are mixed up now, the predator became
the prey
and vice versa. The whole situation resembles to a nightmare.

He cannot
enjoy classical music any more, because of the 'violence' in it makes
him sick,
and what is more, a symphony, which he used to love, makes him jump out
of the
window. A very important part of his previous life turns against him.
We might
say that it was the only thing besides violence that he really loved.

But he did
not even manage to die -- that would be too easy for him. He will be
sitting in
the Korova Milkbar with his new droogs at the end, after he gets cured.
It
looks as if everything remained the same, although we know that nothing
will be
the same anymore. Alex cannot become consolidated like his former
droog, Pete.
Although he has been given a chance to start another life (he can go
home and
his parents will be his slaves), he does not even realize it. He is
only
eighteen, but he thinks he got old. Mozart or Rimbaud had already
finished
their greatest works by this age. We have to mention that the film
adaptation
ends after Alex's recovery to meet the expectations of the American
audience
and even some British publishers chose this 'mutilated' version. Of
course the
novel can only be regarded as a complete work with this 'framework'.(6)

In Part Two
and Part Three Alex is regarded as a tool. First they use him to test
the
Ludovico's Technique, then the conspirators and the government both want
to use
him for fulfilling their political ambitions. He does not understand
what is

happening to him, but he does not care, he never tries to control his fate. The key-sentence of the novel ("What's it going to be then, eh?") expresses this uncertainty.

The only people who cared about him were his parents and P. R. Deltoid, and when he spits Alex on the face it becomes clear that things has changed forever, an irreversible process has begun with the murder of the old lady. His droogs, whom he trusted, betrayed him as his cell mates do after the second murder. Maybe one of the main reasons for his aggressive and ruthless behaviour is the fact that he did not get enough love.

But Burgess does not believe in love and he has also lost his faith in the human race. It is quite sad, but we have to say that he was realistic in a way, because comparing to the early Sixties we are much closer now to the world of 'A Clockwork Orange'. Of course we must not forget about the author's illness, he was told that he was going to die within a short period of time and this fact determined his gloomy, pessimistic style.

The strange Russo-English language could mean that we are after a war between the Superpowers and the new world system combines their most repulsive features. Traditional culture has lost its value and the only person who can appreciate classical music in the novel is Alex. We might say that he is the only depository of a thousand years' culture, he represents our aesthetic standards.(7)

We could also say that this novel is a kind of very sharp critique of Twentieth century society. The decline of public morale, the disappearance of human feelings are real problems that we have to face every day. But is there anything we could do about it? What Burgess does is only helping us in realizing that we are on the Road to Nowhere. (The problems of modern society appear even more strongly in his other, less known anti-utopia 'The Wanting Seed', which has many things in common with 'A Clockwork Orange'.)

Nevertheless, its language makes 'A Clockwork Orange' one of the most impressive of Burgess's prolific range of novels. Its verbal inventiveness may be related to the multilingual facility its author developed as a teacher in Malaya, (and Alex's fascination for reproducing patterns of sound perhaps reflects Burgess's lifelong interest in music and its composition.) Alex's teenage language is sufficiently peculiar to keep readers distanced from the immediate impact of horrors which follow from his choice of 'the bad':

"Pete and Georgie had good sharp nozhes, but I for my own part had a fine starry horrorshow cut-throat britva which, at that time, I could flash and shine artistic. So there we were dratsing away in the dark, the old Luna with men on it just coming up, the stars stabbing away as it might be knives anxious to join in the dratsing ... and, my brothers, it was real satisfaction to me to waltz - left two three, right two three - and carve left cheeky and carve right cheeky, so that like two curtains of blood seemed to pour out "(pp. 16-17)

Such language is at times almost too successful in formalising or romanticising Alex's violence, occasionally disrupting the sort of moral response it should help to direct upon issues of freedom, evil and choice.(8) We may also mention that some of the words used by Alex became parts of real teenage slang (e.g. 'droog'). We also have to acknowledge the author's extraordinary talent on inventing puns based on the similarity between the sounds of some Russian and English words (e.g. horrorshow , gulliver) and there are some other witty plays on words too: e.g. cancer packet meaning a packet of cigarettes or in Part Two he calls the chaplain 'Charlie' referring to Charlie Chaplin.

Alex tells us the story in First person Singular and the 'I-narrative' makes the story sound more authentic. Every little part is worked out in great detail so after a while the reader can easily identify with the hero. However, it is not really difficult for us to imagine a world, which is simply a pessimistic but witty caricature of the world we live in. All the extremities of the novel are based on the author's personal experience (e.g. during his visit in the former Soviet Union he witnessed the 'dismantle' of a pub by a group of teenagers armed with hammers and iron bars), what Burgess does is only thinking further these weird things and placing them into another context by creating an unusual, amazing story. The aforementioned experience helped him realize that even violence has its ritual.(9)

The idea of the Ludovico-technique comes from the fact that a similar treatment , developed by B. F. Skinner , had been used in some prisons in the U. S. A. to make law-abiding citizens out of criminals.(10) This aspect of the novel can be regarded as a protest against this 'mental sterilization'.

Alex's violence can also be approached from another point of view. We might

say that
it is a rebellion against the monotonous, pointless life that is forced
on him
by the State. A very important paradox of the novel is the fact that
this
repulsive, aggressive behaviour is indicated by his desire for human
dignity.
He wants to break free from a totally inhuman world and he obeys his bestial instincts to
remain human.

There is also
a kind of sarcastic and ironic humour in the novel, which is very
characteristic of Burgess. On the one hand, it appears in the informal
narrative of Alex, on the other hand, some of the episodes are based on
such
absurd situations that they are comical, or rather tragicomic (e.g. his
struggle with the old lady's cats or Joe's adoption by his parents). It
helps
the reader keep the distance and remain an outsider. His humour is a
device to
compensate for the violence -- without the witty style it would be
unbearable.

Finally, we
should find out what the title, 'A Clockwork Orange' means. We could
say that
its the allegory of the man of the twentieth century, who has been
distorted
into a kind of weird machine. ('Orang' means 'man' in the Malay
language and we
know that Burgess was living in Malaysia for more than ten years.)(11)
That is
the idea of both novels, F. Alexander's 'novel in the novel' and
Burgess's
novel too, although their style is absolutely different. We could also
say that
Alex is also a 'clockwork orange', even if he looks 'organic', he is
controlled
by machine-like mechanisms.

- (1)
R. Stevenson:
The British Novel Since the Thirties
p.
180
- (2)
A.
Csejdi: Epilogue to 'A Clockwork Orange'
p.
195
- (3)
A.
Burgess: A Clockwork Orange
p.
34
- (4)
R.
Stevenson: The British Novel Since the Thirties
p. 180
- (5)
A.
Burgess: A Clockwork Orange
p. 122
- (6)
A.
Csejdi: Epilogue to 'A Clockwork Orange'
p.
194
- (7)
ibid.
- p. 193
- (8)
R.
Stevenson : The British Novel Since the Thirties
p. 181
- (9)
A.
Csejdi : Epilogue to 'A Clockwork Orange'
p.
191
- (10) ibid.
p.192
- (11) ibid.
p. 195

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