

A Clockwork Orange

Anthony Burgess

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Content Introduction	Burgess's well-known work, <i>A Clockwork Orange</i> , was published both in British and America. The book is divided into three sections— seven chapters in each section. British version does not abridge the twenty-first chapter while American version abridges it.

Abstract

Anthony Burgess, undoubtedly, could be regarded as one of the greatest prolific, influential and versatile British writers. By his death in 1933, Burgess had produced more than 50 books, including *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Wanting Seed*. Most of Burgess's novels deal with the concept of original sin and human nature; moreover, in *A Clockwork Orange* Burgess successfully brings his studies of language and music into the novel that provides readers another way to appreciate his work.

Anthony Burgess' A Clockwork Orange

Our protagonist Alex, in Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, was successfully created as a rebellious and violent teenage boy. Alex, a fifteen-year-old young boy, acts as a killer, rapist, and sadist and performs as a "destructive power" in *A Clockwork Orange*, which brings great shock and impact to readers. What interests me most is the ambiguous world in *A Clockwork Orange*. What are the ironies that Burgess tries to imply between the individual "self" and the world "control"?

Life, for Alex, is a journey of searching for "self-identity". Burgess sets the background of *A Clockwork Orange* in a future England where it seems not a well-ordered and progressed world. The world is declining. People seldom read books or poetry but they watch television or movies instead. Few people listen to classical music but they listen to pop music instead. What can be seen in everyday newspaper is "usual", according to Alex, ultra-violence and bank robberies. The world is sick. More people take drugs and commit all sorts of social crimes. More people live in a kind of unconscious way and are not aware of the true meanings of their existences. What kind of world is it? Our protagonist Alex once says that "what sort of a world is it at all? Men on the moon and men spinning round the earth like it might be midges round a lamp, and there's not no attention paid to earthly law nor order no more. So your worst you may do, you filthy cowardly hooligans" (14). I think Alex, at the beginning, tries to search for "self-identity" through the order of the world. As a teenager, Alex is searching for certain norms or principles that could help him to identify himself, but he fails. World, itself, is chaos and disorder. Finally, Alex turns to himself. Our protagonist, surprisingly intelligent, creates a totally new world which belongs to him and his droogs, including a new language, new ways of dressing and behaving, and new norms and principles. However, Alex might encounter two stages of self-identification.

First of all, from "Alex" to "pseudo-self". In the novel, when Alex and his droogs want to rob someone, they will put the masks on. What does "mask" mean to them? Does it imply any important meaning? I think masks stand for one's new identity. One time when Alex and his droogs try to rob Dim's shop, Alex says:

"We put our maskies on—new jobs these were, real horrorshow, wonderfully done really; they were like face of historical personalities (they gave you the name when you bought) and I had Disraeli, Pete had Elvis Presley, Georgie had Henry VIII and poor old Dim had a poet veck called Peebee Shelley; they were a real like disguise, hair and all, and they were some very special plastic veshch so you could roll up when you'd done with it and hide it in your boot" (9).

The mask, on the one hand, could protect Alex from being recognized. Besides, it could give him a new identity and a new persona like the mask Alex chooses to wear is Disraeli, the first

Earl of Beaconsfield. What the mask provides for Alex is nothing but a pseudo-self—he could hide his real identity under it. Moreover, the mask is accessible. One day, when he is getting tired of the mask (identity), he can just throw it away and decide who he wants to be next.

On the other hand, I believe that the mask not only represents a pseudo-identity but also an invisible social power. Disraeli and Henry VIII symbolize political power; Elvis stands for musical power; Peebee Shelley symbolizes literary power. Ironically, we realize that Alex laughs at old Dim because he wears the mask of Shelley—a poet. In the society, literature and art are being forgotten by people.

Secondly, the stage from “pseudo-self” to “a clockwork orange”. One obvious example is that after Alex is under imprisonment, he gains another new identity—6655321. Alex once says:

“Dressed in the height of prison fashion, which was a one-piece suit of a very filthy like cal colour, and the number sewn on the groody part just above the old tick-tocker and on the back as well, so that going and coming I was 6655321 and not your little droog Alex no longer” (76).

Who is Alex? Alex no longer exists. He is a young criminal who lives in State Jail Number 84 F and his name is “6655321”. I think number is a metaphor which turns “human into an object” and acts as another “pseudo-identity” to Alex. Once people lose their self-identity, they are gradually losing their free choice and free will. While Alex is researching for self-identity, he himself may not notice that the environment is taking away his free will. He says:

“Me, me, me. How about me? Where do I come into all this? Am I like just some animal or dog? Am I just to be like a clockwork orange?” (126-7).

One ironical point is that Dr Brodsky comforts Alex, “In less than a fortnight now you’ll be a free man” (116). Physically, he will become a free man; however, his spirit will become nothing but a restrained thing. Another ironical point is that the purpose of Ludovico’s technique tries to remove the “badness” and “destruction” from Alex; however, Alex’s ability of appreciation of Great Music is taken away by this technique. Alex will lose his free will and can’t do either of them—good or bad. I think Burgess wants to invite us to reconsider one question “Who am I?”.

Works Cited

Burgess, Anthony. A Clockwork Orange. New York: Norton, 1995.