

FREEDOM OF CHOICE AND MORAL CONSEQUENCES IN ANTHONY BURGESS' *A CLOCKWORK ORANGE*

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Abstract

The main character of Anthony Burgess' A Clockwork Orange fifteen-year-old Alex is a murderer, a rapist and sadist and he expresses Burgess's own ideas. His violence is both a matter of free choice and an act of rebellion, this freedom of choice and its moral consequences being the main themes of this novel. While reading the novel, the recurrent question, "What's it going to be then, eh?" becomes more difficult to answer since the dilemma posed by the book is a true one.

Key-words: criminals, moral consequences, behaviourist methods, society, ideals, violence

A Clockwork Orange can be read in conjunction with the main ideas of The American behaviourist psychologist B. F. Skinner, the author of such works as *Walden Two* and *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* who studied operant conditioning and maintained that behaviour is shaped and maintained by its consequences and who attempted to explain even complex human behaviour as a series of conditioned responses to outside stimuli. But Burgess seems to have been influenced less by Skinner's ideas than by accounts of behaviorist methods of reforming criminals on trial in American prisons attempting to limit the subjects' freedom of choice to what society called "goodness", the novel trying to clarify the issue of using such methods.

Thus the novel is interesting not only as a linguistic tour de force. It is an extraordinary piece of social satire, and, like *The Wanting Seed*, it passes the test of "relevance." As far as the behavioral psychological background is concerned sometimes people seem to fail to understand that that Skinner's ideas of imposing goodness on the human personality are among the less radical than those proposed by behavioral technologists.

Burgess's main character Alex is one of the most murderous creations in twentieth century fiction. He is an ambiguous character and his name suggests ambiguity, too, hinting at a Russian/English identity. It fuses the negative prefix *a* with the word *lex* which suggests simultaneously an absence of law and a lack of words. Considering Alex's behavior, lawlessness is obvious but the idea of word lacking is subtler and harder to understand. Either when he speaks to his droogs in nadsat or when he respectfully speaks to his elders in Russianless English he seems to be in full command of language. However, he is lacking words in the sense that he lives his life directly, without

the medium of words. He never tries to explain or justify his actions in terms of abstract ideals: such words as "liberty" or "stability" have no meaning to him. He never assumes any role for himself within society, he simply experiences life directly, sensuously and joyfully, enjoying it while he is free. He finds joy in every form of violence, from destruction, theft of objects to sexual and nonsexual assault, yet surprisingly the term innocent may come to a reader's mind.

Alex's tastes are also surprisingly refined, he enjoys European classical music, especially Beethoven and Mozart, incongruously differing from his murderous propensity. Knowing his own character Alex is amused by the idea of the "civilizing" influence that music has upon individuals.

The first part of the novel abounds in all forms of violence: rape, murder, assault, robbery, and vandalism and the reader is exposed to an incredible spectacle of pleasure in violence. Such psychopathic delight may be considered unhealthy but Alex's sanity is not questioned, he is simply free to choose what pleases him. The problem that his choices are invariably destructive is not a problem after all, since Burgess debates upon the society's right to deprive him of this freedom to choose whatever he may like..

It is interesting to note that Alex experiences life as a "good citizen" and he is finally caught trying to escape from a burglary involving murder of (an old woman) because he is betrayed by his gang who are the ones that facilitate his capture.

He will be sentenced to fourteen years in prison, and here that he will experience the effects of significant changes in government policy due to the previous failure of liberal methods of government. As an alternative to these methods, the government tries to impose order by resorting to the most efficient means offered by modern behavioral technology which aims at the total control of human will. Alex, who murders a fellow inmate, is selected as a "trail-blazer" to be "transformed out of all recognition."

Alex's transformation consists in eliminating his capacity to choose socially unacceptable courses of action.. He is strapped in a chair and forced to watch of incredibly brutal films, some of them fiction but others actual documentaries of Japanese and Nazi atrocities during World War II. Violence has given him pleasure when he was free but now he is suffering from unbearable nausea and headaches while watching these films. The nausea has not been induced by the films but by injections given beforehand and now his body associates the sight or even the thought of violence with unpleasant sensations. Even his beloved classical music is associated with nausea and electronic devices wired to his body measure his responses and progress. Finally, he is completely rehabilitated and is exhibited as a great success before an audience of government and prison officials. This display demonstrates that his body will not permit his mind to even conceive the thought of violence. When a hired actor insults and beats him, Alex responds in a truly "Christian" manner, not only doing but willing good for evil and literally licking the man's boots. There is another demonstration proving that Alex is above sexual violence as well. When a ravishing young lady approaches him on the stage, he has a momentary old yearning "to have her right down there on the floor with the old in-out real savage," but again his "conscience" stops him and he can end his nausea only by assuming an attitude of noncarnal adoration. Being rehabilitated as a "true Christian," Alex is restored to the society now as a harmless citizen, proving that that the government is doing their best for the remedy of social ills and thus deserves reelection.

But Alex is harmless indeed but vulnerable as well: Shortly after his release he is the vengefully beaten by one of his former victims, an old man helped by some of his friends. As now he is not able even to endure a violent feeling, he is rescued by three policemen one of them being a former member of his own gang and another a former leader of a rival gang who have probably been recruited apparently on the theory that their criminal desires can be useful in the maintenance of order in the society.

Alex's former friends find his new situation ideal for revenge. They drive him down a lonely country road and beat him viciously, leaving him in pouring rain to drag himself toward an isolated cottage with the name HOME on its gate. But this little cottage was the place where he and his droogs committed one of the most savage atrocities before his imprisonment. One of the victims, a writer named F. Alexander had been beaten up by Alex and his gang and forced to watch the rape his wife which resulted in her death. The writer has devoted all his energy to combatting the evils of "the modern age", blaming government failure for his wife's death and trying to discredit the government for the next election.

In spite of his experience as a victim of human violence F. Alexander has remained committed to the belief that man is "a creature of growth and capable of sweetness." That is why he rejects the techniques of conditioning used in criminal reform believing that man is capable of sweetness and should not be turned into a piece of clockwork. On Alex's visit F. Alexander does not recognize him (as he and his droogs were wearing masks when they committed the rape.). He sees in Alex only another "victim of the modern age" and he is very compassionate. But he realizes that he can use Alex as a propaganda device to criticize the government and the dehumanizing effects of its crime-control methods. He invites to him three friends who share his beliefs and in spite of their liberalism, they have little concern for the human being as they are completely seduced by the abstract and the visionary. To them Alex is "A martyr to the cause of Liberty" who can serve "the Future and our Cause."

One day Alex awakens as murderous as before his treatment. By using "deep hypnopaedia or some such slovo," some psychological engineers have restored his "self," and both his love for Beethoven and murdering. As he listens to the "glorious Ninth of Ludwig van," he exults,

"Oh, it was gorgeosity and yumyummy..... And there was the slow and the lovely last singing movement still to come. I was cured all right".

And at this point this is the ending of the American edition of A Clockwork Orange and of Stanley Kubrick's film on the book. However, in its earlier British editions, there one additional chapter that completely changes the way we may interpret the book. Like the chapters begining the novel's three main parts, this one opens with the question, "What's it going to be then, eh?" which the reader has been left to answer. We have seen Alex's vicious "self" replaced by a well-behaved "not-self, then replaced by his old "self" when he is "cured" and these are the only possible alternatives for Alex.

However, the omitted chapter reveals another alternative. In exactly the same way the novel began, Alex and his new gang are sitting in the Korova Milkbar, drinking hallucinogenic "milk-plus mesto" and getting ready for the evening. But while the opening chapter is a prelude to violence, this last chapter reveals an Alex who is tired of violence. Leaving his gang and wandering alone in the streets, he reflects on the changes he has undergone. In spite of the fact that the behavioral engineers have restored his old self, he is more sentimental and longing for something besides the pleasure of listening to classical

music and the "old ultra-violence." He wants to settle down: to marry and have a son whom he will try to teach what he knows of the world but doubting that his son will be able to learn from his mistakes.

The recurrent question, "What's it going to be then, eh?" becomes more difficult to answer because the dilemma proposed by the book is a true one. If Alex remains as he is when he awakens "cured," the society has to choose between permitting him to exist as such until he kills someone else and is again confined, or imposing "goodness" ,in such a case being guilty of a moral evil greater than any of Alex's crimes. Even from a strictly moral standpoint, the choice can be very difficult. It is a book centering on "the chance to be good" and resulting from a single, significant existential dilemma: Is an evil human being with free choice preferable to a "good monster" without it? The dilemma is clearly suggested to us in the novel when Alex, who is on the verge of submitting to conditioning, is admonished by the prison chaplain:

"It may not be nice to be good, little 6655321. It may be horrible to be good. . . . Does God want goodness or the choice of goodness? Is a man who chooses the bad perhaps in some ways better than a man who has the good imposed upon him?"

A terribly difficult question.

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