

Burgess's comment on society in a clockwork orange

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



The decade in which post-war social change is felt to have been concentrated is the 1960s. This is certainly a simplification, but it does help pinpoint some of the more dramatic changes that may have been longer in the making. For example, one of the key social changes of the 1960s is the emergence of 'youthculture'. The sense of a newly empowered sector of society is conveyed principally by the new spending power of young people, and the emergence of mainstream youth-related cultural forms, especially popmusic, that quickly become significant components of the economy.

The most memorable fictional treatment of youth culture in the 1960s, however, puts a very different construction on the changing balance of power. In *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) Anthony Burgess isolates the tribal, antisocial elements of youth culture in a dystopian fable of violence as leisure. On the surface *A Clockwork Orange* is a novel about juvenile delinquents in a near-future Britain, but on a deeper level it is a novel about conditioning and free will.

Even the parboiled paternalism of the Empire and the synthetic socialism of the welfare state had still apparently left room - though not much - for a dialogue between the individual and society and had kept alive discussions as to what was right and what was wrong with England. Now what had been the issue was exacted from the sensibilities of those who, glutted physically and socially, lived under what amounted to a deadening hedonism.

It must have seemed only logical to Burgess, after exploring the dialectics of the single and collective mind, that the problem of the novelist was to probe its metaphysics- to see how the naked needs of his rebel anti-heroes could

be met in a mad, lost, loveless, brutal, sterile world. Alex, the gross product of welfare state overkill, is not depraved because he is deprived but because he is indulged. "Myself," he notes rather pathetically at the beginning of *A Clockwork Orange*, "I couldn't help a bit of disappointment at things as they were those days. Nothing to fight against really.

Everything as easy as kiss-my-sharries" (Burgess 11). Alex's utopia is more than the result of self-gratification; it is the consequence of the "original sin" inborn with every offspring of modern organizational leviathans. Having discovered that existence has always meant freedom, but never having been taught "goodness," Alex responds predictably and inevitably to the killing burden of choice. Alex took on the status of a heavy metal hero, psychologically lobotomized by an insensitive society. Alex's tone is consistently bright, breezy, humorous, cynical, confident, and amoral, as is Alex himself.

This is the opening of his story: "What's it going to be then, eh? There was me, that is Alex, and my three droogs" (Burgess 5). It is a book focusing on "the chance to be good" and proceeding from a single, significant existential dilemma: Is an evil human being with free choice preferable to a good zombie without it? Indeed, at two points in the novel Burgess spells out the dilemma for us. On one occasion, Alex, about to submit 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 terrible terrible thing to consider. And yet, in a sense, in choosing to be deprived of the ability to make an ethical choice, you have in a sense really chosen the good" (Burgess 96). And on the other, the unwitting F. Alexander, with whom Alex finds sanctuary temporarily, similarly remarks: " You've sinned, I suppose, but your punishment has been out of all proportion. They have turned you into something other than a human being. You have no power of choice any longer.

You are committed to socially acceptable acts, a little machine capable only of good. . . . But the essential intention is the real sin. A man who cannot choose ceases to be a man" (Burgess 153-54). Yet, were this all Burgess had to say on the matter, the impetus of the dilemma would lose substantially in force. Society at large has never troubled itself with the existential agony (unless to repress some manifestation of it), and judging from the preponderance of sentiment abroad today, it would undoubtedly applaud the conditioning process that champions stability over freedom.

But Burgess has found inhering in the central dilemma considerations even more immediate. What distinctions between good and evil are possible in the contemporary world? As absolutes, have such distinctions not been totally perverted or obliterated? And as relative terms, depending for definition on what each negates or excludes, have they not become purely subjective? In a technically perfect society that has sapped our vitality for constructive choice, we are, whether choosing good or evil, zombies of one sort or

another: Each of us is a little clockwork orange making up the whole of one great clockwork orange.

Burgess blames the excesses of human nature on a repressive society that corrupts its citizens - and primarily its youth - by restricting their liberty and force - feeding them outmoded values. Thus, their natural rebellion gets out of hand and only leads to more repression. The result is the satirical picture of a society moving towards an ever more repressive future. Burgess foresees a social trend toward increasing state/government control of individual lives, culminating in a political system which hires thugs as police and condones brain-washing techniques to 'reform' criminals.

Youth violence has reached an extreme which is clearly fantastic; the failure of the adult world to prevent/control/reform youth-as-psychopathic-condition reaches an equally blackly humorous extreme. For example, on April 19, 1989, a young banker, walking in Central Park, was raped and left to die. The police soon caught a group of Harlem teens and charged them with gang rape. "Wilding - the newest term for terror in a city that lives in fear," wrote the New York Post on April 22 (Hancock 38). I think term "Wilding" defined by the Post writers can be referred to the violent raves in *A Clockwork Orange*.

In Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* political pragmatism reigns: venal politicians grasp at sure and easy ways to erase crime; the police are as violent as the criminals they battle; political reformers are prepared to destroy 'victims' like Alex in their attempts to bring down the government. These mainstream social/ political structures try, but fail, to reduce Alex to '

a clockwork orange'. Works Cited Burgess, Anthony. A Clockwork Orange. New York: Norton, 1963. Hancock, Lynnell. " Wolf Pack: The Press and the Central Park Jogger. " Columbia Journalism Review. Vol. : 41, 5 January-February 2003, 38.