

An analysis of
youthful rebellion and
social change in a
clockwork orange and
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“ Is it better for a man to have chosen evil than to have good imposed upon him?” (Burgess 86).

In his 1962 classic *A Clockwork Orange*, Anthony Burgess explores the concept of dystopian societies by employing his 15-year-old rebellious anti-hero, Alex, to demonstrate the effects of an oppressive and struggling government. Alex in many ways can be identified as a combatant against the State, rebelling against the resulting mundane and suppressive social environment through carrying out malevolent deeds such as rape, murder, and theft with his friends, or—as termed in the novel’s slang English dialect nadsat—his “ droogs”. In addition, Katniss Everdeen in Suzanne Collins’ 2008 novel *The Hunger Games* commits several unruly actions in order to assert her position as an insurgent against the dystopic State of Panem and its Capitol. It is evident that both of the central characters in each of these narratives apply their youthful and rebellious efforts, as a symbol for wishing to alter the social conditions of each of their dystopic environments.

The primary setting in Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange* is a semi-futuristic and unspecified English-speaking city, ruled by a Government that Burgess portrays as having qualities of both American capitalism, and Russian communism. This odd State also attempts to suppress its citizens and their free will, predominantly in pursuit of stability for the Federation and to protect its longevity. For example, Alex’s parents, Pee and Em, are two ordinary civilians completely regulated by the State’s impositions. They have a nuclear family, possess virtually no lives or hobbies outside of their banal State jobs, and in contrast to their devious son Alex, the two are not motivated to create and pursue goals outside of their regular everyday

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endeavors. These subdued and complacent characteristics are true for many of this society's inhabitants, however it is imperative to note that there is a strong presence of disobedient youth like Alex that, to a degree, use "ultra-violence" and crime to rule over the contending justice system. Through analyzing the contrast of these demographics in Burgess' dystopic society, it is clear that the conditions generated by this suppressive government create a strong binary social system. As the first quote in this essay blatantly illustrates, the overarching theme tested in *A Clockwork Orange* is the battle and disparity between good and evil. More specifically, adopted evil over inflicted good. This concept can be interpreted as rebellion in itself, as choosing to oppose what the State is inflicting upon its people is a classic example of systematic disobedience. For example, in chapter four of part one, Alex disputes with his Post-Corrective Advisor P. R. Deltoid about the origins of rebellious behaviour. Alex states: Badness is of the self, the one, the you or me on our oddy knockies, and that self is made by old Bog or God and is his great pride and radosty. But the not-self cannot have the bad, meaning they of the government and the judges and the schools cannot allow the bad because they cannot allow the self (40). Essentially, Alex argues that sinfulness is an inherent part of man, and if one cannot accept his or her own human nature, then one will never experience the essential evil that exists within. This can also be interpreted as Alex making a point that the Government seeks to destroy an entire part of its citizens' natural essence, but he makes it obvious that he will not allow that to happen to himself. By making this statement, Alex has also asserted his position as a conscientious rebel against the system.

As previously stated, Alex not only speaks of his disapproval of the State, but he actively demonstrates his rebellion with his friends Dim, Pete, and Georgie. The three “droogs” consistently find themselves up to no good, constantly seeking destruction and terrorism in order to maintain their positions in society. Their first, most brutal infraction that supersedes the negligible violence of chapter one, is when the boys steal a car, break into a cottage, and assault the occupants. What is interesting about this rampage specifically, is that the man who owned the cottage was a writer. Alex had previously expressed his distaste for literature in chapter one, when he tore up the books that belonged to the old man he and the boys attacked on their way back from the Korova milk bar. Perhaps it was the drugs infused in the milk they drank that night, but it seems as though Alex has a specific antipathy towards writing. When Alex discovered that the man who owned the cottage was a writer, he stated: “It’s a book,” I said. “It’s a book what you are writing.” I made the old gooss very coarse. “I have always had the strongest admiration for them as can write books.” Then I looked at its top sheet, and there was the name—A CLOCKWORK ORANGE—and I said: “That’s a fair gloopy title. Who ever heard of a clockwork orange?” Then I read a malenky bit out loud in a sort of very high type preaching gooss: “—The attempt to impose upon man, a creature of growth and capable of sweetness, to ooze juicily at the last round the bearded lips of God, to attempt to impose, I say, laws and conditions appropriate to a mechanical creation, against this I raise my sword-pen—” Dim made the old lip-music at that and I had to smeck myself. Then I started to tear up the sheets and scatter the bits over the floor, (21-22). It is made clear through his final cruel actions that Alex’s initial expression of admiration for authors was sarcastic, <https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-of-youthful-rebellion-and-social-change-in-a-clockwork-orange-and-the-hunger-games/>

as he has made a complete mockery of this man. Alex ostensibly has contempt towards anybody that contributes to the success of the State, and for citizens that carry out their mundane jobs and think like everyone else does. The destruction of literature in history represents an element of censorship, and is routinely an extension of an opposition to the contents of the books in question. Ironically, however, the contents of the book that the man was writing seem to go along with what Alex believes in; that oppressive laws should not be imposed upon creatures capable of so much more. As if it were not enough for Alex and his droogs to breach this man's privacy and destroy his work, the boys proceed to physically assault him and take turns raping his wife while he was forced to watch. It is indisputable that the rape consummated by the boys is not in pursuit of sexual pleasure, but it is an act to declare power and dominance in opposition to the oppressive environments they live in.

Later on in the novel after Alex undergoes "Ludovico's Technique" as part of his Reclamation Treatment in prison, the reader is finally able to see the extent to which this dystopic State is willing to go to eradicate evil and enforce good upon its people. The brainwashing is a forthright mechanism employed to ensure the Government's complete and utter control over the thoughts, actions and ambitions of its citizens. It essentially diminishes an individual's ability to exercise their right to choose. Definitively, Alex ends up losing the free-will he used to pride himself on. This brings us back to the first quotation of the essay, "Is it better for a man to have chosen evil than to have good imposed upon him?" (86). This makes the reader ponder whether it is better to lead a life of choice and freedom, or a life of

capitulation. It is not Burgess' intent to defend Alex's violence, however, it is his aim to preserve existentialism. In the end, the concept of free will is reinforced when Alex has a spontaneous remission from his previous brainwashing and becomes his old violent self again. Successively, however, he becomes tired of his malicious actions and decides that he wishes to—once again—exercise his freedom of choice, and lead a life of non-violence and settle down with a wife and children. It is true that Alex lives a life of free-will for most of the novel, using his violence as a rebellious tool to combat the rest of society, who consistently behave as a passive horde.

Similarly, Katniss Everdeen in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* acts as an insurgent against the oppressive and totalitarian Capitol of Panem. Panem is the main setting in *The Hunger Games*, and is the futuristic result of the natural disasters that have totaled North America. Panem is divided into 12 Districts, each district increasingly poorer than the last. Katniss, a frustrated and destitute 16-year-old citizen of District 12, does whatever she can to protect her little sister and mentally-ill mother; even if it means disobeying the law. Her first act of rebellion against the oppressive State is when she illicitly abandons the perimeters of her district to hunt for food. Even though trespassing in the woods is illegal and poaching carries the severest of penalties, more people would risk it if they had weapons. But most are not bold enough to venture out with just a knife. My bow is a rarity, crafted by my father along with a few others that I keep well hidden in the woods, carefully wrapped in waterproof covers. My father could have made good money selling them, but if the officials found out he would have been publicly executed for inciting a rebellion (Collins 5). In just the first few pages

of the novel, Katniss discloses her outright refusal to conform to the Capitol's ridiculous subjugation of the Districts. She has openly stated that if she were to be caught, she would be severely punished, and possibly accused of conspiracy because of her hand-crafted weapon. However, Katniss is not willing to accommodate the inhumanity brought on by the Capitol. As Katniss says, "' District Twelve. Where you can starve to death in safety,'" (6). She is willing to risk her own life in order to assert her position against the Federation and to ensure that her family gets the food they need.

Just as Alex loathes how the Government in *A Clockwork Orange* forces citizens to become mindless creatures of habit, Katniss despises how the Capitol treats and exploits the poorer Districts. And just like Alex, Katniss does not complain about these problems. She allows her actions to speak for her, by doing what the Capitol expects her not to do. " But what good is yelling about the Capitol in the middle of the woods? It doesn't change anything. It doesn't make things fair. It doesn't fill our stomachs. In fact it scares off nearby game" (14). Through her inner monologue made possible by first-person narration, the reader can tell that Katniss would rather exercise her rebellion than voice it. Similar to the fact that Alex would rather rape, pillage, and fight than start an organized protest, Katniss would rather hunt and forage outside the District limits, and illegally trade her game at the Hob than complain. In an ideal world, Katniss would not live in a District where sustenance is unfairly rationed, and where she would not have to sell her safety for food. So, until that becomes true, she will continue to rebel to get what she both needs and wants.

Katniss' second act of rebellion against the Capitol is when she volunteers to take the place of her sister, Prim, in the Hunger Games. However, Katniss volunteered after Prim's name was called, which is not in compliance with the rules of the games. The rule is that once a tribute's name has been pulled from the ball, another eligible boy, if a boy's name has been read, or girl, if a girl's name has been read, can step forward to take his or her place. In some districts, in which winning the reaping is such a great honour, people are eager to risk their lives, the volunteering is complicated. But in District 12, where the word tribute is pretty much synonymous with the word corpse, volunteers are all but extinct (22). Again, Katniss has proven that she is willing to contravene the Capitol's authority to ensure the safety of her family, and to assert herself as an insurgent.. And because volunteers are so rare, the Capitol allowed the act of disobedience in order to make the show more interesting. Perhaps Katniss has even begun a revolution where friends and families of chosen tributes are permitted to volunteer in each other's place.

In essence, Katniss has used her youthfulness as an eligible tribute to spark social change. This is gratified when the crowd at the reaping grants her with a silent salute. " Then something unexpected happens...At first one, then another, then almost every member of the crowd touches the three middle fingers of their left hand to their lips and holds it out to me...It means thanks, it means admiration, it means good-bye to someone you love" (24). Finally, Katniss displays her most significant act of youthful rebellion by performing Rue's burial during the games. " I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that

whatever they do or force us to do that there is a part of every tribute they can't own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I" (236-237). It was an act that had never been done before. It was an act to show the Capitol that she was fed up with their statutes, regulations and behaviour. She rebelled against not only the Capitol, but the social norms that had been practiced in the Hunger Games for years imposed by the Gamemaker; that they should never show mercy for each other. Preceding Rue's burial, Katniss and her opponent Peeta execute their final act of rebellion by threatening suicide and not accepting the Gamemaker's rules, that there has to be one last man standing after a fight to the death.

Both Alex and Katniss do not accept the social conditions of the places in which they live. The two use their youthful rebellion as a metaphor for social change in each of their societies, and do so risking their own individual safety. They both refuse to conform to the behaviour practiced by the majority of those that surround them. Alex and Katniss perform actions that both put them at risk for incarceration and oppose the actions of their peers. These two dystopic narratives, *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Hunger Games*, both portray protagonists that attempt to spark a societal revolution.

Works Cited

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