

A clockwork orange and the literary canon



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The literary canon is comprised of texts said to be of considerable value, texts regarded as experimentally profound and which may even be said to change the way the reader perceives the world. A Clockwork Orange can be deemed an experimental masterpiece, as it explores universally significant and social issues which challenge the moral conscience of its reader.

Through his unique use of language, Burgess deals with explicit subject matters and appears to appreciate the strength of his words, as well as the timeless power they hold. Furthermore, through his portrayal of youthfulness and violence in general, the writer toys with cultural stereotypes and the concept of free will, thereby challenging the reader in regards to the morals and preconceptions of what truly makes someone human. Following Alex throughout the diegetic narrative, Burgess explores many levels of morality, which contribute to its social significance, rendering it as a canonical text

Burgess experiments with language to engineer a gripping narrative and craft the reader's perception of Alex. From the outset Burgess employs Nadsat, a hybrid idiolect employed by Alex and his 'droogs,' and which at first seems alien to the reader. The language Alex uses is representative of his youth as well as the stigma and stereotype society has around teenagers both in his dystopian sphere and our own contemporary one: " Out comes the blood my brothers" (A Clockwork Orange (2013) Page 59). Alex's maturity is affirmed through the language as he greets such a violent and usually horrific thing with childlike excitement; blood for Alex appears to be an extremely rewarding outcome- his potential for evil and badness becomes ominously evident. Alex addresses us, often with ' O my brothers.' which allows the story to be told more personal, as it seems to be just us that Alex

is talking to, and we are in receipt of story which is only being told to a chosen few, he is connecting the reader, making his audience an accessory to these gruesome acts and they left unsure how to feel. Alex continues to personify acts of violence as if to intensify the pleasure of his crimes: “Smecking off with the till’s guts” (A Clockwork Orange (2013) Page 16). He even goes as far to consider his violent acts as a channel in which to greet something he loves most, describing blood as “[An] Old friend.” In quite a poetic manner, Burgess makes it clear that Alex is so desensitised that violence has become his closest companion. This ‘ Old friend’ presents an irony, as when the novel progresses Alex’s relationship with violence becomes subverted once more, as any act of such becomes his biggest fear and enemy, what once brought immense satisfaction ends up bringing horrendous discomfort to Alex, at the hands of the state. Burgess therefore “Consciously play[s] with the possibilities of expression in order to produce verbal art” (Montgomery et al (2000), Page 297). His language in its complexity shrouds the narrative in an air of childlike mystery at the start of the novel and constructs something lacking superficiality with immense meaning. The author himself admitted that the language was a way to give quite an explicit message to the audience in a passive manner: “ They are scared rightly of language” and that his nad-sat is in fact “ Meant to muffle the raw response we expect from pornography” (Burgess, A. (2009) A Clockwork Orange Resucked NP). Burgess wanted people to look past the immediate explicitness of his language and perceive a message of much deeper origins, tapping into a hallmark of a canonical text.

Another morally universal theme which Burgess' novella highlights, and which contributes to its canonical significance, is the importance of free will.

Questions are posed to the reader as they are to Alex through the motif: "What's it going to be then, eh?" (A Clockwork Orange (2013) Page 1).

Whenever we see this phrase within the novel, Burgess is presenting moral and ethical dilemmas of choice to Alex as well as to the reader. We are drawn to acknowledge the fact that the state is slowly stripping him of choice, fraudulently making Alex (along with the rest of society) believe he has a choice when in reality he is becoming 'A Clockwork Orange,' as Burgess alludes to in the article commenting on his own novel; "a human being is endowed with free will [...] If he can only perform good or only perform evil, then he is a clockwork orange." This has a direct correlation to the canon as it explores how "Minds aren't free at all, they only think they are" (Bertens, H (2001) Page 8). Incongruously, Alex himself discusses the significance of free will to mankind and whether the absence of choice can lead to someone's loss of identity, wondering "[Is] a man who chooses the bad, perhaps in some ways better than a man who has good imposed upon him" (A Clockwork Orange (2013) Page 92) Burgess suggests "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Burgess, A. (2009) A Clockwork Orange Resucked NP). In this sense, Alex is a product of the society in which he resides. His experience reveals that the state evidently has a significant amount of power over the individual and the mind frame which that individual has, or at least can be given. Burgess, in a reflection on his own novel, encourages the reader to internalize the debate about the importance of individual free will: "Eat this sweetish segment, or spit it out.

You are free” (Burgess, A. (2009) A Clockwork Orange Resucked NP). The novel provides its readers with a clear insight into what happens if a corrupted state is allowed to have too much control. Burgess’s theme is reflective of the context in which it was written, in a time when surveillance was being used in abundance in an attempt to counter disorder. We are left with the idea that if a man attains no free will, then he is no man at all. Wholly resulting in a canonical text, this theme kindles thought within the reader regarding how universally we all attain some form of free will, no matter how small. What matters is how we use it, as we’d soon miss it if it was gone.

Burgess also focuses on the issue of morality in the text, reflecting again its canonical status through the inclusion of ‘ themes of universal importance’ (Montgomery et al (2000), Page 297). During the course of the novel, we witness Alex’s actions as he takes it upon himself to teach the ‘ wrongdoers’ of society a lesson, despite not conforming to society’s norms and values himself. Such blatant hypocrisy is in many ways ironic; we are outraged with the injustice so explicitly presented: “ No school this after lunch but education certainly, Alex a teacher” (A Clockwork Orange (2013) Page 50). Alex believes that it is his place to be in the position of power and teach these girls who have truanted from school a lesson by raping them. It is clear that Alex perceives himself as a moral arbiter of society, re-educating those who transgress in a horrifically violent and invasive way, presumably to satisfy his own criminally deviant tendencies in the process. Thus, the narrative subverts the traditional connotations of a teacher as upholder of moral and social conventions into something much more sinister. Burgess’s

own take on his choice to deliberately include such shocking subject matter is as follows; “ It is as inhuman to be totally good as it is to be totally evil” (Burgess, A. (2009) A Clockwork Orange Resucked NP). The text leads its readers to the inevitable conclusion that morality is entirely relative, and that unless we are proactive in guarding the values that we believe ‘ civilise’ our society, then we risk shaping amoral young men and women such as Alex. This realization and the universality of the text are what furnish it as so canonical.

Furthermore, Burgess explores metaphysical issues of existence in his text by involving God and religion in Alex’s narrative in a controversial way—a way which other writers may shy away from. Alex’s attempt to absolve any guilt he may have by externalizing responsibility for his actions raises moral questions. Alex argues that: “ Badness is of the self and that self-made by old Bog” (A Clockwork Orange (2013) Page 34) As Alex shifts culpability for his actions onto God, discussing how God must have made him this way for a reason, he manages to almost criminalize God as the perpetrator of all the treachery in the world. We as readers begin realizing the repercussions that such an outlook could have. In a dystopian society, the state would be expected to remove full control of the self and appropriate some ‘ selfhood’ for its own ends. In these societies, the creation of mechanized and reified individuals who are “ merely one link in a long chain” (Bertens, H (2001) Page 8) is to be expected. Burgess is exploring how the harshness of capitalism has severed the link between man and God, enabling Alex to absolve responsibility for his behaviours. Bertens states: “ Capitalism alienates them from themselves” (Bertens, H (2001) Page 8). Burgess

reflects this viewpoint in his work: “ Only a clockwork toy to be wound up by God or the Devil or...the almighty state” (A Clockwork Orange (2013) Page 67). The exploration of these complex metaphysical themes in a popular novel is unusual, especially as expressed through the first-person narrative of Alex. This tactic further elevates the novel into the canon.

After much consideration of several determining factors, we can clearly see that the novel A Clockwork Orange does in fact belong among the classics, in the literary canon, for various reasons. Burgess isn't reluctant to approach controversial topics and challenge the moral values of the society we live in, lending his composition such considerable universality. He subverts the preconceived ideas the audience may have about cultural stereotypes of the adolescence, stereotypes interchangeable with a wide range of communities around the globe. Almost everyone can relate to the novel's Marxist undertones and criticism of capitalism, hence its profound presence in the life of many who read it.