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A Clockwork Orange: The Intersection Between a Dystopia and Human Nature

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An archetypal depiction of a dystopia is one dominated by bleakness and roboticism, a totalitarian government enforcing upon the people a lifestyle that lulls them into a state of obedience. Anthony Burgess' 1963 novel, *A Clockwork Orange*, is a nightmarish vision of future Britain, one in which behavioral modification is taken to dangerous extremes in the quest for preserving the order of a disconnected society. In many ways, *A Clockwork Orange* differs from the standard prototype of the dystopian sub-genre. First, the novel is self-described as a society in its pre-dystopian hours, in the beginnings of totalitarianism. Secondl, the audience perceives the world through an adolescent lens. Alex, a fifteen year-old criminal, is the protagonist of the story, a youth who fights to feel alive in a corrupt society that he does not quite understand. Through these two paradigms, Burgess shows the audience that the prime characteristic that marks a society as 'dystopian' is the lack of moral choice. Burgess utilizes this to expose the raw agenda of a dystopia: the prioritization of social control and efficiency over human nature.

The dystopian journey of *A Clockwork Orange* is told through the first-person narration of Alex, the fifteen year-old anti-hero of the novel. Alex, together with his band of "droogs," takes the night life into his own hands, sadistically committing crimes of murder, rape, and theft. In one of their most horrendous crimes, Alex and his cronies forge their way into the home of a couple, where they rape the woman as her husband is forced to watch. The turning action comes when Alex learns that his friends are traitors, setting him up one night to be caught by the police. After extensive time in an over-crowded prison, Alex is told there is a way to be released back into society: he must undergo the "Ludovico technique", an innovative and primitive form of therapy that "cures" criminals. Alex volunteers to be the guinea pig for this experiment, only to discover the truth about the procedure. Pumped with nauseating drugs and strapped down to a chair with his eyelids probed open, Alex is forced to watch horrendous scenes of violence on film. Under the distress of nauseating drugs and lacking the ability to move his body, he is classically conditioned to associate scenes of violence and feelings of pain with overwhelming physical sickness.

Upon being "cured," he is released back into society. Shunned by his parents and beaten by cops on the street, he becomes distressed by anything associated with violence or suffering, from the physical beatings he takes by the police, to the cacophonous rhythms of the musical symphonies he once loved. Homeless and alone, he stumbles into the house of the man whom he once forced to watch the rape of his wife. He discovers that this man, named F. Alexander, is a revolutionary who wants to use him as proof of the evils of "the Government," the near-totalitarian party that is looking for re-election. Feeling used by everyone and treated more like a tool than a human being, Alex tries to kill himself by jumping out of a window. Upon coming out of a coma, Alex learns that the

Government has reversed the effects of the Ludovico technique after the bad press they received when the story of Alex's near-suicide was publicized. Given back the power of human choice, Alex returns to his life of crime, but only briefly. He decides in the end that he would like to have a child and become a productive member of society.

Class discussions have established that the main distinguishing factor between a utopia and a dystopia is the ability to leave the society, with a utopia obviously being the one which allows for such an action. While this is true, it also rests on a faulty premise that utopias can, if necessary, use the same methods as a dystopia to attract and sustain true believers, as long as there is "an option to leave". However, it runs much deeper than this. Dystopias are mainly distinguished from utopias because they do not operate on free will. Citizens are not aware of options. Utopias, while imprinting certain beliefs on their followers, still act on a level of consciousness. The people understand their options and freely give up their own individual desires for the good of the community. This is not the case in a dystopian society, and it is the essential premise that *A Clockwork Orange* builds upon.

Burgess' vision bears many similar characteristics to those of prototypical dystopian novels, like *1984* and *Brave New World*, but this work feels wholly unique through the paradigms by which these characteristics are focused. The first paradigm that Burgess filters his vision through is the notion of a dystopia in its early stages. F. Alexander, the revolutionary figure in this novel, describes the society as slowly becoming "the full apparatus of totalitarianism" (Burgess 160), and such a distinction is made very clearly in the plot. The government has not yet reached a state of censorship, as seen in how the media is able to expose the damage done to Alex (Burgess 176), but there is a distinctly passive and emotionless attitude that permeates throughout the society. Alex's friends are revealed to be traitors at the mercy of the government (Burgess 65-67), and upon being released from prison, he also discovers that his parents have effectively disowned him, leasing out his bedroom to a tenant (Burgess 134). As a criminal, he is a pariah of society. This very distinct attitude—the lack of empathy shown to him by his friends, parents, and the law—illustrates a culture that is slowly becoming one, all-consuming machine. In his essay about the dangers of too much power residing in the hands of the government, English philosopher John Stuart Mill writes, "Their [the people's] passivity is implied in the very idea of absolute power" (Mill 47). This notion truly echoes in *A Clockwork Orange*. It raises a similar sentiment upheld by F. Alexander. He emphasizes, "There are great traditions of liberty to defend...The tradition of liberty means all. The common people will let it go, oh yes. They will sell liberty for a quieter life" (Burgess 161). At the hands of "the Government," one sees the effects of totalitarianism beginning to operate in the minds of the people, only being taken to dangerous extremes in the Ludovico technique.

This leads into the second paradigm, which is that of youth. Alex is a fascinating protagonist for a dystopian novel because he is not a

discontent individual, nor is he someone seeking to revolutionize his society. He commits horrendous crimes because it is all that allows him to feel emotion in an increasingly robotic world. Heller and Kiraly state, "..._A Clockwork Orange_ portrays a detached, uncaring society where ultraviolence is the only method of saying, 'I am alive'" (Heller and Kiraly, Jr. 199). Typically, adolescence is associated with the struggle to find one's self in a world that wishes to mold the individual to fit its needs, rather than the other way around. Though Alex's actions are horrendous, his struggle to simply feel alive in an alienating society is something the audience regards with empathy. It is a shocking portrait of the mindset of this state, for only those who commit unspeakable obscenities are the ones allowed to feel human emotion. Robbie Goh argues that Alex's alienation is further emphasized through his use of an invented slang, a language called 'Nadsat' that "represents conditioning and entrapment" (Goh 264). The language is used pervasively throughout the novel, to such an extent that it is often difficult to decipher Alex's narration. But essentially, that is the point, for Alex is alienated from the audience as well.

What Burgess presents to the audience through these two paradigms is a very raw and embryonic vision of a dystopia, for one sees how it acts in its new and emerging form, and specifically, how it preys upon those who struggle to escape its effects. So, how does an emerging totalitarian society learn to effectively control its population? By learning how to control those who threaten to disrupt the order of it. And thus, the corrupt government takes in Alex as their guinea pig for the Ludovico technique. Burgess utilizes this set-up to expose the defining characteristic of a dystopia: the forceful revocation of free will from the people. It is the underlying characteristic of all aspects of a dystopia, from oppression, to censorship, to lack of individual rights, to surveillance. The inherent evil that lingers underneath all of these qualities is that moral choice is not an option. Burgess states in the introduction:

> ...by definition, a human being is endowed with free will. He can use this to choose between good and evil. If he can only perform good or only perform evil, then he is a clockwork orange—meaning that he has the appearance of an organism lovely with colour and juice, but is in fact only a clockwork toy wound up by God or the Devil or (since this is increasingly replacing both) the Almighty State. (Burgess ix)

All societies, to some extent, will condition their people to act upon certain norms. It defines culture. In America, for example, a majority of conditioning comes through advertisement and the free media. The difference is that in a democracy, people can educate themselves and remain aware. In Burgess' dystopian Britain, Alex is classically conditioned like a Pavlov dog. He is a psychological experiment of the state. In the Ludovico technique, Alex is strapped down to a chair with his eyelids grotesquely pried open, pumped full of sickening drugs and forced to watch scenes of horrific violence. With the drugs and feelings of entrapment acting on his system, he becomes conditioned to associate violence and suffering with

overwhelming sickness. Alex describes his first session, saying:

> And then I was forced to viddy a most nasty film about Japanese torture. It was the 1939-45 War, and there were soldiers being fixed to trees with nails and having fires lit under them...and you even viddied a Gulliver being sliced off as soldier with a sword...The pains I felt now in my belly and the headache and the thirst were terrible, and they all seemed to be coming out of the screen. So I creeched: 'Stop the film! Please, please stop it!' (Burgess 105)

It is a very deliberate, direct, and calculated manner of controlling the body and mind. Alex may be a criminal, but Burgess poses the question of humanity. He may be immoral, but he is nevertheless an individual.

When Alex is released back into society, Burgess pushes this notion forward. The effects of the Ludovico technique have essentially rendered Alex as an android. He desires to feel emotion, but his body only has the capacity for passivity and survival instincts. Just looking through a medical book in a library is enough to arouse nausea in him (Burgess 142). What Burgess shows here is that when free will is taken from one, emotion is eliminated as well. To be alive is to perceive both suffering and happiness through experience, art, and interactions with the world. It means having the choice to experience every emotion on the human spectrum, for one can only perceive beauty when they are open to the full human experience that lies behind good and bad. This is aptly expressed when Alex attempts to listen to Mozart, an artist that he feels a substantial connection with. Upon listening to it post-conditioning, it sickens him because he associates it with the cacophonous sounds of the music used in the violent recordings he watched (Burgess 139). It is a key moment in the novel when the audience realizes that those qualities one associates with individualism—creativity, art, personality—are being eradicated from him. In attempting to eliminate the conflict that arises out of free will, a dystopia eliminates the human. F. Alexander remarks to Alex, "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... Music and the sexual act, literature and art, all must be a source now not of pleasure, but of pain" (Burgess 156). There is a conflict between humanity and the control of a state. For a state to be completely efficient, human frailty must be removed from the system. However, what many governments will fail to recognize is that suffering and happiness are symbiotic. One cannot exist without the other, and one cannot be human without the ability to choose between good and evil. Thus, in Burgess' words, the core characteristic of a dystopian nation is the calculated modification of the most passionate individuals into automatons, clockwork oranges.

A Clockwork Orange utilizes the notion of "dystopia" to examine the intricacies of human nature. For Burgess, human nature is the ability to make personal decisions about morality. Essentially, a

dystopia is a government that chooses what is easy over what is right, prioritizing the control of the state over the freedom of the individual. The argument is presented to the audience through the depiction of a totalitarian society in its very primal form, and then, showing how it acts upon the young and passionate anti-hero of the story. Burgess' vision is an excellent one because he does not merely tell a dystopian story. Rather, he uses the concept to reveal a universal and important aspect of what it means to be human. He does not get lost in the semantics behind the various dystopian characteristics. Instead, he exposes what utopias and dystopias can tell one about their own nature. In this manner, *A Clockwork Orange* is extremely prevalent for this time, not only as an interesting work in the dystopian sub-genre, but as a fable about what it means to simply be alive.

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