Exemplar student response

‘A Clockwork Orange is a protest novel about the powerlessness of human beings against ruthless autocratic governments.’

Using ideas from the critical anthology to inform your argument, to what extent do you agree with this view?

At first glance there seems little to debate about this view. It is certainly true that A Clockwork Orange directly attacks totalitarian governments. When Alex is subjected to the Ludovico Technique, which removes his freewill, Burgess makes it clear that such a treatment is wrong no matter how heinous Alex’s crimes. But the focus in the given view is on ‘human beings’ and it is not easy to see how the novel protests against the powerlessness of women either at the hands of a ruthless state or at the hands of male characters – ruthless or otherwise. In fact it seems the novel endorses the powerlessness of women given that they are largely invisible, silent or just types.

Burgess wrote his dystopian novel in 1961 and although it is set in his future – or near future – it very much reflects political ideas, cultural changes and attitudes of his own time (the rise in youth violence, the growing interest in psychological experimentation and aversion therapy, and state control in the Soviet Union). His autobiography (You’ve Had Your Time) makes it clear that he was condemning totalitarian regimes, warning what can happen to any Western society and showing that trust should not be placed in the state. It is easy to read A Clockwork Orange as a Marxist text because it shows how the working classes are commodified by the system. Although the world of A Clockwork Orange is closer to a communist than a capitalist one, the treatment of workers here is the same as in Dickens’s Hard Times. There is a law ‘for everybody not a child nor with child nor ill to go out rabbiting’. Alex’s mother and father are examples of the exploited class; she fills up shelves in a Statemart; he ‘rabbits’ in
the dyeworks. Both parents illustrate Marxist ideas of alienation and victimisation. Importantly, Alex, the novel’s protagonist, rebels against the prevailing system suggesting that Burgess welcomes the undermining of repressive regimes. However it could also be argued that although Alex thinks he is a rebel who plays the system, he is as much a pawn of the state as his parents. He only thinks he has choices. ‘What’s it going to be then, eh?’ opens all three sections and seems to signal the different choices Alex as an agent of freewill can make. But if Bertens’ ideas are applied, then the choices that Alex thinks he has are still actually determined by the social economic structure of his world. At the start of the novel, as Alex delivers his own account, it seems that he has choices open to him. During one night he and his droogs choose to attack a schoolmaster, rob and beat up a shopkeeper and his wife, brawl with a rival gang, using knives, razors and chains, steal a car, break into a cottage owned by a writer, destroy his book and gang rape his wife. But in real terms Alex’s choices are limited. In him, Burgess creates an unreliable narrator. Seduced by his own arrogance and the naive optimism of his youth, he thinks he can make endless choices. But, he cannot choose to be a government minister or a scientist or go to the opera nor do any of the things that the privileged classes can do. He sees himself as a rebel with some power over authority, but in a sense his crimes are sanctioned by the state (it turns a blind eye to drug taking and seemingly tolerates the violence on the street). Although the police are irritated by Alex’s behaviour and he is eventually imprisoned, Burgess does not show the government itself as feeling threatened by the delinquency of young people. Indeed part of the reason for the introduction of the Ludovico Technique is not so much to reclaim the streets for ordinary people but to clear the prisons of thugs like Alex to make room for political prisoners.

However, the use of aversion therapy as a form of control must not be overlooked as a terrible abuse of state power. Burgess was clearly appalled at the choice the state could make in using science to control behaviour. The prison chaplain becomes the author’s mouthpiece when he asks ‘Does God want woodness or the choice of goodness?’ As a Catholic, Burgess comes down firmly on the side of choice. Although many readers, particularly those in the 1970s who saw the novel as an incitement to violence, will argue that such a punishment is more than just given Alex’s crimes – he is a rapist, a child abuser and a murderer, Burgess is in no doubt that an intervention which kills the soul, is morally wrong. As the chaplain says: placing Alex ‘beyond the reach of prayer’, is a ‘terrible, terrible thing to consider’. Significantly, though, Burgess does not suggest a viable alternative solution to the problems of street crime.

What he does propose is that behaving in an antisocial way is simply a rite of passage and that eventually young criminals grow up. Many commentators have lambasted Burgess for his conclusion suggesting that it is a cop out. Although some criminals might reform, many do not. Even in the novel there are older male criminals in the Staja. However, there is another point to consider here. Burgess offers the final chapter as a kind of victory for Alex. Alex is ‘cured’ and then chooses of his own freewill – and because of his biological calling – to ‘grow
up’. But Alex’s growing up and conforming is problematic from a Marxist viewpoint. He chooses roles that are socially constructed for him and so the state continues happily unchallenged. Perhaps, in seeking solutions, Burgess is as much trapped by the economic world as his characters. Alex loses interest in criminality because he wants to keep all his earned pretty polly for himself, ‘to like hoard it all up for some reason’. By becoming a capitalist of sorts, the state is more firmly in control. So while Burgess seems to be supporting the rights of the individual, in the end he affirms state control.

But there are more disturbing issues regarding women. The dominant voices in the story are males and the story is about males. There is also an assumption that the readers of the novel are male (Alex refers to the readers as his ‘brothers’) reflecting the male centred nature of civilisation. While it must be remembered that this is Alex’s vision and not Burgess’s, the author must carry responsibility for the world he creates. As an inspiration for the novel, Burgess says he used the growing dissent of British teddy-boys, mods and rockers but it is only male teenagers that he represents even though there were females in those cultural groups. All the major roles in the novel are masculine. Alex narrates, he and his droogs commit crimes, he is the victim of brainwashing, he is the battleground for conflicting political interests, Brodsky is the scientist, Brannom the doctor and all involved in politics are male. Perhaps, though, Burgess can be forgiven for the attitudes that are posited. Marxist criticism itself largely focuses on males. In Marx’s ‘Foreword’ in his 1859 Towards a Critique of Political Economy (cited by Bertens in the AQA anthology) ‘It is not the consciousness of men [my italics] that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness’. Marx gives no sense that females might have a consciousness or an existence and indeed in A Clockwork Orange, there are no young women who are part of the gang culture, no women who challenge authority. Female struggles are not reflected in the novel. Perhaps Burgess’s representations of women just repeat cultural stereotypes.

Referencing Millet, Bertens suggests that in much literature women are largely presented in terms of their sexuality and that the relationship between sex and power mirrors the larger society. Certainly in A Clockwork Orange women are predominantly seen for their sexual purposes. Even the nurse who is part of Alex’s recovery has a sexualised role. At the start of the novel, the droogs decide not to rape Slouse’s wife because they are not yet ready for that; the night is too young, though gang rape is what they do later and with impunity. F Alexander’s wife is subjected to a terrible ordeal and although some readers overlook the incident because the account of it is comicalised by Alex and softened by nadsat, it is still rape and rape is not funny. When Alex and his gang come across Billy Boy and his droogs, Alex says the rival gang were ‘just getting ready to perform something on a weepy young devotchka ... not more than ten’. Later Alex himself persuades two young ten year old ptitsas to go home with him where he rapes them to the joys of Beethoven’s Ninth. Readers today, in the wake of high profile reports on the abuse of young children will surely find such moments unpalatable, but there is little disquiet expressed by anyone in the novel.
Interestingly in Kubrick’s film the girls are much older suggesting that he knew there was a boundary which he couldn’t cross.

F Alexander’s wife is clearly a victim of Alex’s sexual brutality and depravity, yet her role as victim goes further. Although her death sends her husband ‘bezoomny’, and he claims he misses his ‘dear dear girl’, it is her role as wife that he misses most. When Alex revisits him after his treatment, he says that his house is untidy because his wife used to do all the ‘domestic chores’ – what Bertens termed as an ‘angel of the house’.

The cat woman is another victim and different kind of cultural stereotype. She is a victim in that Alex breaks into her house and murders her, but she also fulfils the role of ‘dissatisfied shrew’. In defending herself she is not presented sympathetically or heroically. She is presented as humorously aggressive: ‘Keep your distance, you villainous young toad, or I shall be forced to strike you’. Alex calls her a ‘stinking starry old sharp’ and the fight between them is like a musical farce with her panicking cats providing a chorus.

At the end of the novel women are represented as wives and baby makers. In chapter twenty when Alex is afforded full redemption, he itches to get married, have dinners provided and reproduce. As he imagines his future, Alex thinks of the son (not daughter) he will have. The American publishers W. W. Norton were disinclined to publish the novel unless the final chapter was dropped. However this was not because of the slight on women. The American audience had at that time an appetite for negativity (so wanted Alex to continue in all his vicious glory). Burgess, however, wanted optimism and focused on Alex’s ‘moral progress’ – a progress of course that saw the main function of women as more providers of sons. Some optimism!

For the most part, then, women have little significance in the novel. Even the language disenfranchises women. Burgess’ creation of nadsat is interesting and makes Alex an engaging narrator, but significantly the words for young males (malchick, chelloveck) are more energised than the words for young females which smack of sexualisation (ptitsa, devochka).

This is a political novel in a wide sense, incorporating important philosophical ideas, but women’s voices are not heard. Alex’s mother says little more than the boohooching girls that he rapes. Given that Burgess’s own wife was the subject of mindless violence when she was robbed and beaten by three GI deserters, it is hard to see why women do not have louder voices in this novel. Unless, of course, the novel’s intention is simply to endorse the cultural domination of males.

Bibliography

* A Clockwork Orange – Anthony Burgess (Penguin) with an introduction by Blake Morrison
* You’ve Had Your Time – Anthony Burgess (Heinemann) (1990)
* AQA Critical Anthology
Moderator's commentary

This is an interesting and engaged essay with a confident personal voice. The student is insightful and takes an individual approach. The task is central to the argument and there is very secure engagement with sections of Marxist and feminist ideas from the critical anthology. A slight weakness in the response is that its structure is a little insecure. Perhaps if the student had restricted focus to Marxist or feminist ideas, more cohesion could have been achieved. The essay could also have benefited from closer textual detail and more precise references, but perhaps the student was mindful of the need to keep the word count down. There is no doubt that the student knows the text well and ranges around it with confidence. This is a very good response.

Assessment objectives

AO1: The essay is perceptive and assured. The argument is ambitious in its attempt to marry Marxist and feminist readings, and even though it is a little uneven, there is much to credit. The student’s expression is mature and there is a confident use of literary critical concepts.

AO2: The student weaves relevant comment about Burgess’s methods into the argument. There is very good focus on voice and structure and some relevant language comment. At all times the student shows how the methods help to shape meanings.

AO3: There is excellent integration of comments on a range of contexts. All comments are made relevant to the argument. The student has a clear handle on cultural, gender and political contexts and there are some judicious comments on biographical and historical contexts. Marxist and feminist theories are centrally connected to the discussion of contexts.

AO4: There is perceptive exploration of critical texts here and ideas are clearly connected to the student’s reading of A Clockwork Orange. Critical ideas are applied with some confidence.

AO5: This is a real strength of the answer. The argument is assured and it incorporates a number of different readings, including readings over time. This response seems to sit comfortably in Band 5.