

English Dissertation

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The importance of free will and choice- a comparative study of the characters of Mark Renton in "Trainspotting" and Alex in "A Clockwork Orange".

*"...People are born innocent, only to be corrupted by society and its ills. Societal corruption, though is neither necessary nor irreversible..."*

The idea of free will and choice in one's life takes centre stage in many works of literature. However, it is at its most interesting when we compare the lives of two separate literary characters- Mark Renton in Irvine Welsh's "Trainspotting" and Alex in Anthony Burgess' "A Clockwork Orange". "Trainspotting" follows the lives of a group of Scottish junkies from Edinburgh, but particularly focuses on the life of Mark Renton, a loathsome heroin junkie, and the random events that occur during the time before and after he tries to get clean from his heroin addiction. "A Clockwork Orange" is a novel which centres around the life of 14 years old Alex, a boy with a twisted love of violence. The novel follows Alex from his night of ultraviolent escapades, to his therapy in prison and finally to his attempted suicide.

From the outset of the novels it is obvious to see that Alex and Renton have very similar lifestyles. Ultimately their lives are missing something that has to be filled by other vices, for Renton it is heroin and for Alex it is violence. Renton takes heroin to escape reality and the responsibilities that come with being a normal functioning member of society.

*"We start oaf wi high hopes, then we bottle it... Basically, we live a short, disappointing life; and then we die. We fill oor lives up wi shite, shite like joabs n relationships, tae delude ourselves intae thinkin that it isnae aw totally pointless."*<sup>2</sup>

Renton is in despair at the fact that life starts off full of hopes and expectations, but then as we get older there are more serious life experience that we have to endure. Also the use of the colloquial profanity "shite" is deliberate. It is used repeatedly to emphasise Renton's self-loathing. For Renton, normal life is what is disappointing and loathsome. Already as a character, Renton is an alien concept to the reader.

*"Smack's an honest drug, because it strips away these delusions. It's the only really honest drug. It disnae alter yir consciousness. It jist gies ye a hit and a sense ay well-being. After that, ye see the misery ay the world as it is, and ye cannae anesthetise yirsel against it."*

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.shmoop.com/clockwork-orange/fate-free-will-theme.html>

<sup>2</sup> Welsh I, *Trainspotting*, Minerva, 1994, page 89

"honest drug" is an oxymoron. All drugs alter the perceptions of reality and behaviour. There is nothing honest about them, but clearly Renton does not agree. The idea that heroin gives "ye a hit and a sense of well-being" is the delusional language of the addict. The reason that he now sees "the misery ay the world" is that his own world is a truly miserable one. He lurches from one hit to the next, oblivious to what is happening in reality. The drugs are why his life is "shite" and why he cannot hold down "joabs n relationships". By the time we have read this little rant form Renton, we have established the fact that he is delusional and unpleasant. For Alex violence seems to hold aesthetic qualities as he often describes his violent acts with much delight and satisfaction.

*"...and that made the old veck start moaning a lot then, then out comes the blood, my brothers, real beautiful." <sup>3</sup>*

He treats these acts of violence as being almost like a piece of art to be admired. Just like Renton, Alex is also a very loathsome character, but the difference is that Alex seems to assume that we all feel the same as him (the constant reference of "my brothers") whereas Renton feels the need to lecture us, to convince us that his opinion is the only one.

Renton decides that he's had enough of his empty, mediocre life and wants to get off heroin. Rather than seeking professional help he decides to isolate himself in a room and go cold turkey in order to quit his drug addiction.

*"Anyway, this time ah've prepared. A month's rent in advance oan this big, bare room overlooking the Links... Partin wi that poppy wis the hardest bit. the easisest wis ma last shot, taken in ma left airm this morning. Ah need something to keep us gaun during this period ay intense preperation. Then ah wis off like a rocket roond the Kirkgate, whizzing through ma shopping list." <sup>4</sup>*

"this time" implies that Renton has tried this before, so we do not necessarily assume this will be a success this time either. The place he is to go cold turkey in is a "big, bare room"- which is not unlike Renton's life itself, signifying either a fresh start or serving as a mirror to show him (and the reader) that he has nothing. The only love he has is for the drug- "Partin wi that poppy" is quite lyrical- it is like a lover bidding farewell to a partner of many years. Once again, Renton is deluded, but at least he has made a choice to reform. Alex, on the other hand, has no such choice.

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<sup>3</sup>Burgess A, *A Clockwork Orange: The Restored Edition*, William Heinemann, 2012, page 13

<sup>4</sup> Welsh I, *Trainspotting*, Minerva, 1994, page 15

While serving his prison sentence Alex is selected to undergo a new technique created by the government- Ludvico Therapy- this involves him being given an injection daily and forced to watch violent films until he is 'cured'.

*"Very hard ethical questions are involved," he went on. "You are to be made into a good boy, 6655321. Never again will you have the desire to commit acts of violence or to offend in any way whatsoever against the State's Peace. I hope you take all that in. I hope you are absolutely clear in your own mind about that."*<sup>5</sup>

Alex's choice is non-existent. We are supposed to side with the government against this violent criminal, because that is the right thing to do. However there are elements of this Ludvico Therapy that smack of coercion and torture. It must be successful ("Never again" is quite definite) as it seems to remove the "desire" to commit violent acts. But we are left feeling conflicted. This treatment is far from "ethical"- perhaps the "ethical question" should be applied to the technique itself?

*"Me, me, me. How about me? Where do I come into all this? Am I just some animal or dog?" And that started them off goworeeting real loud and throwing slovos at me. So I creeched louder still, creeching: "Am I just to be like a clockwork orange?"*<sup>6</sup>

Alex is seen as an animal in training, he is constantly referred to as "good boy" which makes him sound like a dog, therefore dehumanising him. Alex is viewed as a mere machine that the state can use to their own advantage and benefit and due to the removal of his free will, he cannot fight back. As a reader, we hate Alex's violent nature. However, the questionable methods used by the state make them no better than him and reiterate the point that without free will a person cannot change for the better.

Before Renton even begins his detox he decides that one last hit is needed.

*"The great decline is setting in. It starts as it generally does, with a slight nausea in the pit ay ma stomach and an irrational panic attack. As soon as ah become aware ay the sickness gripping me, it effortlessly moves from the uncomfortable tae the unbearable."*<sup>7</sup>

The language he uses is overblown ("great decline") but lets the reader see the pain he is in. (Self-inflicted pain, but pain nonetheless). The speed at which the horror overtakes is emphasised as he moves from "nausea" to "sickness"; from

<sup>5</sup>Burgess A, *A Clockwork Orange: The Restored Edition*, William Heinemann, 2012, page 105

<sup>6</sup>Burgess A, *A Clockwork Orange: The Restored Edition*, William Heinemann, 2012, pages 137-138

<sup>7</sup>Welsh I, *Trainspotting* Minerva, 1994, pages 15-16

"uncomfortable" to "unbearable". The addiction is described as if it is a monster, creeping easily through his system. However, the irony here is that this is before the full detox has even started. This adds to the readers growing doubt of whether this time will be a success or not. Renton can choose to self-medicate to assist him in his quest to feel better (remember, only his "honest drug" can help him- the same "honest drug" that brought him here).

Alex does not have the luxury to make a choice. Even when he becomes violently sick during the therapy he does not have the choice to discontinue the treatment.

*"You felt ill this afternoon," he said, "because you're getting better. When we're healthy we respond to the presence of the hateful with fear and nausea. You're becoming healthy, that's all. You'll be healthier still this time tomorrow."*<sup>8</sup>

The word "healthy" is repeated here to emphasise that Alex is getting better (according to the state). However, how can he be truly healthy? He has no say in his treatment and cannot self-medicate to get rid of the pain. It is fair to say that his loathsome violence did need dealing with, but not necessarily in this way.

After transformation both characters are still not satisfied. Renton becomes bored with his new changed life so reverts to his old ways.

*"Choose life. Choose mortgage payments; choose washing machines; choose cars; choose sitting oan a couch watching mind-numbing and spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fuckin junk food intae yir mooth. Choose rotting away, pishing and shiteing yerself in a home, a total fuckin embarrassment tae the selfish, fucked-up brats ye've produced. Choose life. Well, ah choose no tae choose life. If the cunts cannae handle that, it's thair fuckin problem."*<sup>9</sup>

The repetition of "choose" is supposed to show the reader just how much pressure is put on Renton to make these decisions, but we know that there is no real pressure as Renton does not care about any of the things that he talks about potentially having. Renton cannot accept that this is what life really is, so he ridicules this idea, due to the act that he sees himself as being better than and superior to everybody else. "Choose rotting away, pishing and shiteing yerself" this is exactly what will happen to

<sup>8</sup> Burgess A, *A Clockwork Orange: The Restored Edition*, William Heinemann, 2012, pages 119-120

<sup>9</sup> Welsh I, *Trainspotting*, Minerva, 1994, pages 187-188

Renton if he gets back on the smack, however this whole rant is simply a junky trying to justify his habit.

Renton's situation is different to the predicament Alex finds himself in for one simple reason :

*"...Characters like...Renton in Trainspotting...all have some of the venom and self-absorption of villains, but without the discipline and ambition. They have all despicable goals...But while their stories posit them as bad guys, they aren't Bad guys in the usual narrative sense - ...They're about exploring bad behaviour, and the conscious or unconscious choice to continue it even it isn't satisfying or enjoyable..."<sup>10</sup>*

This sums up Renton's experience entirely. His choices are "his own", but they really amount to laziness. It is easier to revert to type (for Renton, this is reverting to his drug addicted self) rather than work to reform. The significant part is that he is able to make that choice.

However, this is not the case for Alex. Externally Alex is changed but there is no joy left in his life. By taking away his free will, it has dulled the impact of the change as Alex has not made this decision on his own.

*"When a man cannot choose he ceases to be a man."<sup>11</sup>*

It is this lack of choice which leads Alex to attempt to take his own life.

*"...I viddied what I had to do and what I had wanted to do until those old men in the Public Biblio and then Dim and Billyboy disguised as rozzes stopped me, and that was to do myself in, to snuff it, to blast off for ever out of this wicked and cruel world."<sup>12</sup>*

This just shows how utterly miserable Alex is with his transformation. However, the irony is that this is Alex's own choice ("what I had wanted to do") is to end his life as his new existence is miserable. His idea is to "blast off for ever...". We forget that Alex is still young- his language sounds just like a child seeking solace and peace. Had he chosen to change, his life might have been different. However, without choice, enforced change is simply torture.

There is another consideration where Alex is concerned, though :

<sup>10</sup> [https://thedissolve.com/features/exposition/736-the-rare-and-glorious-freedom-of-the-irredeemable-/](https://thedissolve.com/features/exposition/736-the-rare-and-glorious-freedom-of-the-irredeemable/)

<sup>11</sup> Burgess A, *A Clockwork Orange: The Restored Edition*, William Heinemann, 2012, page 93

<sup>12</sup> Burgess A, *A Clockwork Orange: The Restored Edition*, William Heinemann, 2012, page 180

*"...It's impossible to cheer for Alex to get his mental freedom back in A Clockwork Orange, because he's such a revolting bastard before the Ludovico treatment. It's also impossible to root for his tormentors..."*<sup>13</sup>

Alex's behaviour is so truly immoral (and amoral at the same time) that it is very difficult for readers not to have a slight feeling that they do not care if his rights have been impinged on or that his free will and choice have been removed, because he has taken away the free will, choice, dignity and lives from the people he sees fit to toy with prior to his enforced engagement with Ludovico. His tormentors are almost as bad – they consider themselves to be working on behalf of the greater good, morals be damned. Stepping back from this aspect though, and just looking at the idea of free will and choice, Alex, however hateful, does serve as an example :

*"...While Alex has freedom of choice, he is as human as possible. When Alex is rendered unable to choose violence, thanks to Ludovico's Technique, Burgess send the message that he no longer is human, but a mere clockwork orange..."*<sup>14</sup>

When we simply observe Alex as a human (in spite of the ultra violence), it is clear that Burgess' actual message is an important one. Man without free will is no man at all. We must be able to make our own choices, right and wrong, in order to fully play a part in our society. Burgess himself was horrified at what his novel became once in the hands of Stanley Kubrick, who adapted it for the screen :

*"...it became known as the raw material for a film which seemed to glorify sex and violence. The film made it easy for readers of the book to misunderstand what it was about, and the misunderstanding will pursue me until I die. I should not have written the book because of this danger of misinterpretation..."*<sup>15</sup>

This is a pity, for Alex as a character can teach us as readers many lessons about what it means to be human, and what happens when we surrender our free will to a nanny state or dictatorship. Perhaps it is time to revisit "A Clockwork Orange" with fresh eyes, and time to look again at what happens in our society to enable characters like Mark Renton in "Trainspotting".

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<sup>13</sup> <http://birthmoviesdeath.com/2015/01/21/our-daily-trailer-a-clockwork-orange>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.shmoop.com/clockwork-orange/fate-free-will-theme.html>

<sup>15</sup> <http://birthmoviesdeath.com/2015/01/21/our-daily-trailer-a-clockwork-orange>

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