Citing a Critical Essay Written for Novels for Students


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Chris Semansky

Semansky teaches literature and composition online. His essays, stories, and poems appear regularly in magazines and journals. In this essay, Semansky examines Burgess’s narrative technique.

When we tell stories or listen to them, there is always a teller, someone describing the situation and relating the action, often commenting on it. When the person telling the story is also involved in the story, the teller is called a first-person nar-

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A Clockwork Orange

Novel, 1962
British Writer (1917 - 1993)
Other Names Used: Wilson, John Anthony Burgess; Wilson, John Burgess; Kell, Joseph (British writer);

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**A Clockwork Orange**

Novel, 1962

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The reviews the novel received were generally favorable and emphasized both its thematic elements and its style. As anonymous reviewer for the New York Times calls the book “brilliant,” and writes, “A Clockwork Orange is a tour-de-force in nastiness, an inventive primer in total violence, a savage satire on the distortions of the single and collective minds.” The 1987 American edition carries a blurb from Time magazine which states, “Anthony Burgess has written what looks like a nasty little shocker, but is really that rare thing in English letters—a philosophical novel.”

The novel has received its share of attention from academic critics as well. John W. Titton, writing in Cosmic Satire in the Contemporary Novel, praises Burgess’s use of Nabokov, saying that Burgess used it “to assure the survival of the novel by creating a slanging idiom for Alex that would not grow stale or unamused as real slang does.” In his study of Burgess’s novels entitled The Clockwork Universe of Anthony Burgess, critic Richard Matthes writes that “A Clockwork Orange is a masterpiece as both a novel and a film.”

Comparing the kind of government in the novel to “a rotten mechanical fruit,” Matthes argues that Alex’s “disturbed spirit may somewhere have strikes more intimate moral sensibilities.” Robert B. Evans, in his essay on Burgess in British Novelties since 1900, considers the work “an expression of disgust and revulsion about what has happened to society in our lifetime.” In her essay, “Linguistics, Mechanics, and Metaphysics,” Anthony Burgess’s A Clockwork Orange, Esther Petax writes, “The reader is as much a victim of the author as Alex is a victim of time’s finite presence.” Petax notes that, like Alex, the reader also comes of age in reading the book, and “is charged with advancement and growth.”

**Criticism**

Chris Semansky

Semansky teaches literature and composition online. His essays, stories, and poems appear regularly in magazines and journals. In this essay, Semansky examines Burgess’s narrative technique.

When we tell stories or listen to them, there is always a teller, someone describing the situation and relating the action, often commenting on it. When the person telling the story is also involved in the story, the teller is called a first-person narrator.

When novels use such narrators, they must choose between a first-person central narrator and a first-person peripheral narrator. Both use the same pronoun “I,” but the latter involves a narrator who, although telling the story from his or her point of view, is a minor player in the events described, often an observer of things happening to others. A first-person central narrator, on the other hand, also involves a narrator who tells the story from his or her point of view, but who is a major player in them—that is, the narrator describes events directly related to him or her. In A Clockwork Orange, Burgess uses a first-person central narrator, Alex, who describes his violent antisocial crimes in an often humorous and intimate manner. In doing so, Burgess creates sympathy for a character who is in the wrong way is abominable.

Alex refers to himself as “the humble narrator” or “handsome young narrator,” calling attention to the reader’s role, as well as his own. Often Alex addresses readers, “Oh brothers,” or “O, my brothers,” asking them to share in his own reaction to events as he recalls them. This technique draws readers into the story, lessening the emotional distance between themselves and Alex. In A Clockwork Orange, Burgess’s introduction to the 1987 American edition of the novel, Burgess writes that he wanted to “utilize the narratorial properties of my readers.” He certainly succeeds, as readers are positioned as voyeurs to the lurid and violent action detailed. In this way, they are both shocked and intrigued by Alex’s brutality. This is the same kind of fascination that readers have when reading confessions of a serial killer, or other first-person crime stories. Yet Alex’s story is so confessional; he does not seek forgiveness. Rather, he revels in his exploits and celebrates them, and if anything, is nostalgic at the end of the novel for his violent past and diminishing violent desires. He

Excerpt from A Clockwork Orange by Anthony Burgess

Even Jesus Christ can be seen as a kind of antihero, as he was an outsider who was beaten down and persecuted for beliefs he would not surrender.


Robbie K. Naiman

In the following essay, Naiman examines ethical values in Burgess’s 

Acknowledgments

The Pelagians face no better. Their libertarianism goes to permit discovery and then to an anarchic period of crime, strikes, and deteriorating public services. After a transitional phase, the popular outcry for more law and order heralds the rise of a new Augustinian party and the beginning of another cycle.

This issue comes up in The Clockwork Testament, one of Burgess’s more recent novels. Ending, the hero, is obsessed with Augustine and Pelagius and decides to write about them. He finishes a dozen pages of a film script (included in Burgess’s novel) which culminates in a debate between the two, Augustine arguing in favor of the doctrine of original sin and Pelagius disagreeing. The script is never completed, and whether the dispute is never settled.

In A Clockwork Orange, the anarchic quality of the society portrayed in the novel gives way to a Pelagian form of government. The new government in A Clockwork Orange therefore is only in a rudimentary way Augustinian. Its leaders, however, do indicate their lack of faith in human perfectibility by utilizing the Luddite technique and by getting their jail ready for great numbers of political offenders. The characters in the

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