



**Historical context of the novel “The kingdom of the wicked” by Anthony Burgess**

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## HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL “THE KINGDOM OF THE WICKED” BY ANTHONY BURGESS

## CONTEXTO HISTÓRICO DE LA NOVELA “EL REINO DE LOS MALVADOS”, DE ANTHONY BURGESS

### ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the study of the image of Rome and the socio-political situation of the era, which represent a significant historic context. The focus is on the real image of the Roman emperors Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero. The presence in the novel image of the narrator acting as interpreter of history and guide for the reader to actual historical events, suggests talking about the possibility of the historical analysis of the novel. Sadoc is definitely one of the most significant characters in the novel. We can assume that the images of the author and the narrator seem to be identical and Anthony Burgess' main ideas are given by Sadoc. The article gives particular attention to the analysis of the narrative features of Sadoc. Highlighting the actions of the apostles in the struggle for faith, the author doesn't hide the main political events in The Kingdom of the wicked.

**KEYWORDS:** English literature, Anthony Burgess, biblical trilogy, the images of Rome and Roman emperors, The Kingdom of the Wicked, narrator.

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### RESUMEN

El artículo aborda el estudio de la imagen de Roma y la situación sociopolítica de la época, que representan un contexto histórico significativo. La atención se centra en la imagen real de los emperadores romanos Tiberio, Calígula, Claudio y Nerón. La presencia en la imagen de la novela del narrador que actúa como intérprete de la historia y guía para el lector a los eventos históricos reales, sugiere hablar sobre la posibilidad del análisis histórico de la novela. Sadoc es definitivamente uno de los personajes más significativos de la novela. Podemos suponer que las imágenes del autor y el narrador parecen ser idénticas y las ideas principales de Anthony Burgess son dadas por Sadoc. El artículo presta especial atención al análisis de las características narrativas de Sadoc. Al destacar las acciones de los apóstoles en la lucha por la fe, el autor no oculta los principales acontecimientos políticos en el Reino de los malvados.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Literatura inglesa, Anthony Burgess, trilogía bíblica, imágenes de Roma y emperadores romanos, El reino de los malvados, narrador.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the 80s of the XX century, Anthony Burgess repeatedly turns to historical problems, trying to sum up the outgoing century (Earthly Powers 1980, The End of the World News 1982, Any Old Iron 1989).

Apart from the works of this period, the novel *The Kingdom of the Wicked* (1985) [1], in which distinctly (unlike the other two parts of the famous biblical trilogy, the poem *Moses* [2] and the novel *Man of Nazareth* [3]) is traced important for the writer of historical and cultural problems. Political, religious and cultural histories are united in a work in one general context. The novel consists of five books, each of which consistently narrates about the history of Rome in times of imperial dictatorship and the emergence of Christianity.

## METHODS

Particular attention is paid to the connection of the artistic work with the historical tradition and social environment. Traditionally, we focus on large studies of the writer's work [4,5] we use the same methodology that is characteristic of V.R. Amineva, [6] or A. Shevchenko, O. Nesmelova [7]. In addition, we focus on the works of Kozyreva M., Ayupova K. [8], Baratova, O., Shamina, V., & Apenko, E. [9], devoted to the study of the historical context of works of art.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This article sets as its task the possibility of a historical analysis of the novel *The Kingdom of the Wicked* by A. Burgess, also dating back to the 1980s.

The third novel of the biblical trilogy of Anthony Burgess *The Kingdom of the Wicked*, like two other works, was the result of work on the screenplay. It was a work on the twel-

ve-hour series *Anno Domini*, A.D. 1985, delivered by the famous Italian producer Vincenzo Labella, who participated in the creation of the serials *Moses the Lawgiver* and *Jesus of Nazareth*. The series A.D. tells of the life and activities of St. Peter in ancient Rome after the crucifixion of Jesus and the emergence of Christianity during the reign of the Roman emperors. As J. Stinson points out, "In the same year (1985) A.D. was originally a telecast, Burgess turned out his *The Kingdom of the Wicked*, and the novel that weaves the fruits of some assiduous research he did for the television movie" [4: 138].

*The Kingdom of the Wicked* tells of the birth of Christianity after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the preaching of the apostles, in particular Paul, the Great Fire in Rome, the persecution of Christians and the destruction of Pompeii, was a kind of continuation of the second part of the biblical trilogy of Anthony Burgess (*Man of Nazareth*, 1979). But if in the novel *Man of Nazareth*, to the forefront, Judea is put forward as a kind of provincial space and socio-political issues, represented mainly by the images of the Pharisees and Zealots, then *The Kingdom of the Wicked* is, first and foremost, the images of Rome and the Roman emperors (Tiberius, Claudius and Nero).

The image of Rome, the problem of the ideal Roman ruler and the socio-political situation of the era, especially interesting Burgess, constitute a significant historical context of the novel *The Kingdom of the Wicked*. In a conversation with Don Swaim in 1985, the writer confesses: "I was interested in that period" I felt nobody had yet written and heard about it, although we had both sides of the story in the New Testament and we have the Gideon our hotel rooms so we can read about Paul's voyages, but we never read about what was going on in Rome. It's rather like America and Europe: if you sneeze, we catch cold. When Rome sneezed, Israel caught cold" [10: 146].

It is known that Burgess had a significant influence on *The King James Version* of the Bible (1611), but in the process of research, Anthony Burgess re-read the New Testament in Greek, books on the history of the Roman Empire, since, in the author's opinion, one Bible for accurate images details would not be enough. In the "author's note" of the novel *The Kingdom of the Wicked* of Burgess,

he wrote that he addressed a huge number of sources, the main of which were the texts of Suetonius, Tacitus [12], Josephus and Acts of the Apostles, preferably "in the original language" [2: 379].

Building a novel *The Kingdom of the Wicked* on biblical content, Burgess does not escape the independent and extrabiblical narrative. The canonical traditional images of the apostles are presented by Burgess in a format based not so much on the author's fiction as on his attitude to the historical process and the role of certain social groups in him. Putting on the foreground the deeds of the apostles in the struggle for faith, the author does not leave behind the curtain and the main socio-political events of the era of the kingdom of evil. Investigating the images of Rome and its rulers, the writer gives them a description close enough to historically known interpretations. Thus, Burgess shows us Rome as a huge empire with its dying idolatry and superstition, which allowed the creation of the dogmas of the new religion in its bowels (as in the Acts of the Apostles, which arose shortly after the miraculous events of the day of Pentecost). The life of society and its daily existence are considered in the novel through the prism of the accepted "new" spiritual values. Implicit discrepancies between the facts, the recreated image of the Roman Empire do not pretend to argue with history, but act only as an author's design. "Historical facts had to be checked, battle plans closely examined, but, in the modern manner, the reader had to be kept in doubt about the competence of the narrator", says Burgess [13: 327].

Rome of Burgess, according to John Stinson, is "the corrupt Rome of Caligula, Claudius, Nero, and Domitian in lavishly gore detail" [4: 139]. We see that already in the title of the novel, a clear author's perception is indicated. According to the author, "*The Kingdom of Evil*" - during that time - in the first hundred years since the death of Christ ... ", the Jews called the Roman Empire [10: 146]. But the "evil" of Burgess is, of course, not only Rome, which engulfs Jews, but also a part of the essence of each of its inhabitants. "Human nature does not change, and human nature is what fiction is about" - the author himself admits [13: 327]. Rome, being, according to Burgess, "capital of a slave empire", was closed to the lower strata [2:94]. "In

the streets low people jeered at the slaves and some spat...

There north were the Forum and the Temple of Jupiter and the Circus Flaminius and Pompey's Theatre, but slaves were to see none of these things ..." [2:98]. Rome of Burgess, in need of "moral redemption", was good only for those who "did, due, if cynical, reverence to the Roman gods" [2: 365].

For some, Rome is the "imperial world peace and the great flower of order" [2: 297], for others - "As an imperial monarchy it has been disgraced, bathed in the blood of the innocent" [2: 165], for third, "A mother ... hiding behind the skirts of a whore" [2: 311].

"... Rome was worse than Sodom and Gomorrah" writes the author [2: 326]. The world of depravity and cruelty, represented by Rome in the novel of Burgess, is closely connected with the images of the Roman emperors. Speaking at the beginning of the novel about love of the sublime, which Jesus preaches among his disciples, the author proceeds to describe the love in its lowest manifestations, introducing the reader to the image of the emperor Tiberius: "Here let us meet Tiberius Claudius Nero, called from his youth Biberius Caldius Mero, meaning boozier of neat hot wine. A man of orgies, who would receive a dinner in no time, unless assured that the waiting girls would all be naked..." [2:15]. Wicked and unreasonable in his 70 years, he puts on the leadership positions of the same belly-slaves and drunkards. Being a "dull shadow" of his stepfather Augustus, he is unable to revive the empire. Living out their old age in Cyprus, Tiberius refuses to return to Rome, long ago turned into the absence of the "old crazy" emperor in the "filthy shambles" [2:17]. At the age of 77, "the prince of peace," as many called him, Tiberius dies, taking with him the secret of his death [2:86]. "The wickedness of Tiberius was not quickly forgotten ... There were cries that his body should be dishonoured and quartered ... It seemed to many that his cruelty was able to flourish posthumously" [2:86]. Anthony Burgess with historical accuracy draws the figure of the emperor, creating a sense of the importance of every detail in describing the character and lifestyle of the hero. Historical book is confirmed by the book *The Life of the Twelve Caesars* by the historian Gaius Suetonius, whose work, as is known, relied on Burgess [11:45].

Thus, reading the description of Tiberius in the book of Suetonius, we understand that the novel image of Burgess is almost identical to the first: “Even a rookie he was called in the camps for an immense passion for wine, not Tiberius, but “Biberius”, not Claudius, but “Kaldia”, not Neron, but “Meron”.

Then, already in power, already engaged in the correction of social mores, he once ate and drank two days and nights with Pomponius Flaccus and Lucius Piso; one of them he immediately appointed the prefect of Rome, the other - the governor of Syria and, in his orders for appointment, exalted them with his most amiable and ever-present friends “; or “In Capri a few days after his arrival, one fisherman caught him alone and unexpectedly presented him with a huge reddish-haired girl. In the fear that they had made their way through the whole island along impassable rocks, Tiberius ordered to slash him with this fish in the face. And when the fisherman began to thank the fate under blows that he did not bring at the same time the lobster, which he caught even more he ordered to smash his face with a lobster “[11: 45-48].

Gaius Caligula, reluctantly narrated by the narrator, just as accurately recreated in *The Kingdom of the Wicked*. “The nickname” Caligula (“Sapozhok”), he owes a camp joke, because he grew up among the soldiers, dressed as an ordinary soldier. And what kind of affection and love of the army earned him such education, it was best seen when he alone, undoubtedly, reassured the soldiers who were indignant after the death of Augustus and already ready for all madness. In fact, they only backed down when they noticed that from the danger of rebellion they sent him away, under the protection of the nearest city: only they, who were shocked by remorse, grabbed and held the cart, begged not to punish them with such disgrace “[11:52]. Similar information is not missing by Burgess [2:19]. In the novel before us appears the emperor, not only content with his imperial status, but also quite seriously claiming to divine greatness. “He ordered to bring from Greece images of the gods, glorified both by veneration and art, including even Zeus of the Olympian, in order to take their heads off them and replace them with their own” [11:55]. But the painful faith in his divine destiny during his lifetime, the lack of respect and meekness, arrogance and cruelty towards all estates, the ferocity of mo-

erals, the monstrosity of actions could hardly have lifted Caligula to the pantheon of the gods. Ironically introducing his image into the novel, the narrator, however, each time with difficulty turns to the description of the hero: “Gaius Caligula - the name still makes me shudder. It even induces a physical nausea. Ask me no more about him “[2: 97-98].

Forever stuttering and blushing, Claudius, who succeeded Caligula, was probably the only emperor who proclaimed justice, and cares about the future of Rome.

“Rome will be what it was” he says, “a polity in which no man need fear injustice, its capital a city in which men may walk freely at night, its people united in a return to Roman virtue and the worship of the Roman gods, untainted by effeminacy or Oriental pollutions” [2: 165]. Conspiracies, ridicule over inferiority, treachery of the wife did not allow the emperor to prove himself fully. Stupid and intelligent in appearance, but “enlightened” inside, he noticed, by Burgess, everything that is happening around and against him. As you know, the royal husband of Agrippina was under the heel of all his wives, including Agrippina, who herself appointed the prefects, sent the mentors of the son of Emperor Britannicus to exile, surrounding him only with their own people. She achieved for herself unprecedented honors and the fact that Claudius adopted her son from his first marriage, who was older than Britannica and therefore could be considered a more realistic contender for power after Claudius’ death.

This heir, Nero, perhaps the most famous emperor of Rome after the Divine Augustus, is the fourth book of the novel *The Kingdom of the Wicked*. “This Nero is something of a new broom. Only a boy, but he knows all about cleaning the provinces, or so he thinks” [2: 249]. “The Emperor will speak to anyone in any way he wishes. The Emperor will do what he wishes...”- apparently self-sufficient, supported by the mother, Nero still did not rule the empire. Under the guise of the manager-son, the mother of the emperor hid, who artfully imposed his will on him [2: 258]. Literally from the first days Agrippina immediately began to behave as if she was not just the mother of the head of state, but his co-ruler. But soon Nero entered into the taste and did not want to listen to the instructions and act on the orders of the mother. He began to be released from

the care of Agrippina, who, however, did not want to part with the authorities.

The relations between Agrippina and Nero, clearly resembling incest, hatred of the mother, role-playing games with minions, homosexual relations reveal the painful essence of the emperor for whom the death of the mother or the murder of Seneca is only a part of the drama that fills his whole life [2: 260]. But games on the verge of life and death, endless atrocities do not pass for Nero without a trace.

The image of the mother, pursuing him in dreams, leads the emperor to suicide. Abandoned by all and declared by the senate enemy, he stabbed his sword in his throat. "Glee among the people was such" writes Suetonius, "that the mob ran all over the city in Phrygian caps", hoping for slaves upon release into freedom and being a symbol of freedom [11:82].

The narrative is written in the name of Sadoc, the son of Azor, the narrator of novel the Man of Nazareth. The events described by Sadoc, in general, do, quite accurately, repeat the biblical Acts of the Apostles and, in a sense, can claim even historical accuracy, although they contain a series of derogations, the responsibility for which Burgess confidently and without a grain of irony shifts to the narrator. "My fictitious narrator sometimes muddles up, sometimes gets right, authorities we take for granted but he, presumably, can not know", writes the author [2: 379]. Overcoming pain at the end of the novel, Sadoc is only able to finish the book, but not to re-read it, correcting some obvious inaccuracies in statements and portrait descriptions [2: 337]. The presence in the novel of the image of the narrator, acting as a translator of history and referring the reader to real historical events, allows us to speak about the possibility of historical analysis of the work.

### SUMMARY

Covering a certain historical period, Anthony Burgess, in our opinion, still does not focus on the images of some historical figures, highlighting and making vivid the images of the emperors Tiberius, Claudius and Nero. Even Guy Caligula, known for his cruelty, is not as interesting to the author as

the stutterer Claudius, philosophizing about or without.

When asked whether this choice is justified, it is probably necessary to refer to the author's words: "If I have neglected for many pages the minor personages of this chronicle, it is because they have done little worthy of your attention. Who can compare a mother's wiping of her child's nose with the spreading of the word? [2: 251].

### CONCLUSIONS

Enthusiasm for the historical period of Burgess develops into a very serious author's game, with which all participants, including the reader, become participants. The reception "I do believe-I do not believe", once proposed by Burgess in relation to the apostles, grows in the third part of the trilogy to the limits of authenticity and extreme accuracy in the perception of historical persons and events.

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