

Extended Essay for English B

The Language of Control: How Nadsat Manipulates Empathy in
Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*

Research Question: *How does the use of Nadsat in A Clockwork Orange function as a tool to manipulate the reader's empathy and distance them from the violence described in the text?*

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Introduction

Language is a crucial medium for society; it is the framework that serves as the fundamental for any human interaction or communication. Language is the tool that is used to structure and define concepts like reality, morality, and the distinctions between every perspective there is. With the role of language carrying a great level of importance for any individual, it is not difficult to witness various authors using it in their favor. It is not hard to understand that language is not only something that tells the plot of a story, but also a manipulator of cultural and psychological factors; things that can easily be directed in the author's desire as to how they want the reader to comprehend what they read. Anthony Burgess's dystopian novel *A Clockwork Orange*, published in 1962, serves as a striking example of linguistic control: not as a part of the plot, but as the general dialect. While the novel is technically famous for its detailed depictions of gore and violence, the main factor defining the unique voice and progression is the slang known as "Nadsat".

Nadsat is not just a compilation of informal slang words that is used throughout the novel; it is a fully constructed dialect and filter that links the world of the protagonist, Alex, to the reader. Many readers show a tendency to struggle when first getting into the novel, because of the excessive use of unknown Nadsat vocabulary. The use of Russian originating words, Cockney rhyming slang, and constantly addressing the reader, causes major confusion when first getting into the world of *A Clockwork Orange*, and the 1960s British culture. The need for a glossary slowly becomes less though; as the novel progresses and repeats some of the vocabulary in different contexts, the strange foreign words start to become a lot more familiar. By doing so, the reader seamlessly starts to accept and go along with the narrator's perspective of everything.

This realization that encapsulates the reader emphasizes a central point about the novel: the relationship between language and moral perception. The reader is slowly introduced to the usage of Nadsat as it mimics a form of brainwashing, slowly turning their perspective to match the novel itself. However, an important question would be to ask how Nadsat achieves this manipulation. This thought also raises the research question for this essay.

This question “How does the use of Nadsat in *A Clockwork Orange* function as a tool to manipulate the reader’s empathy and distance them from the violence described in the text?” is pivotal because of all the key factors and themes that go into this phenomena, and to answer it, those key factors and themes have to be discussed in detail. *A Clockwork Orange* provides the unique specialty of demonstrating the power and authority of language as a tool of manipulation, while also depicting all the scenes, happenings, and background contexts that come both before and with it. This essay will have the focus of establishing the socio-cultural context of Britain in the 1960s and also explain why Burgess created such a slang; the analysis of these topics will set the foundation for the core investigation. The distancing effect of the dialect, the theme of control and its relation, and the language as a determining factor of identity (Alex’s maturation as the novel progresses and the shedding of the usage of Nadsat). With these combined, this essay will demonstrate that Nadsat is not a gimmick, but the primary instrument of the novel’s moral philosophy.

Context & Background

To fully understand the workings of Nadsat, one must first describe *A Clockwork Orange* itself and the influences that lead to its creation. Published in 1962, the novel is told in first person: the protagonist Alex. The story follows Alex and his friends (which he calls “droogs”) as they go around and commit various forms and levels of violence. The main factor for the emergence of this story was the current state of Britain at that time; the new era defined by consumerism, rigid class structures, and most importantly the rise of the new youth culture all played major roles in defining the Britain of the 1960s. Up until those years, the concept of a distinct culture among the younger generation was almost unheard of, many were essentially seen as children until they became adults. However, with the influences of disposable income and the popularity spike of rock and roll created a new demographic that was both powerful and terrifying for the older generation.

This era was home to the rise of highly distinguishable youth subcultures, such as the “Mods” and “Teddy Boys”. The media at that time televised these groups negatively, and portrayed them as violent, brutal gangs who rejected the established values of British culture. Burgess taps directly into this panic by telling the story of gore committed by Alex and his friends, which is an exaggeration of the real fears dominating British headlines at the time: aimless and violent teenagers who wore strange “uniforms” and spoke their own slang. By inventing Nadsat, Burgess² did not aim for a creative way of speaking, he aimed to mimic the nature of the real-world subcultures of that time, where language served as an identity, and a way of showing membership.

Besides the dominating fear of youth culture, the novel is also deeply rooted in the tension of the Cold War. The choice to base Nadsat primarily on the Russian language was done on purpose, as a provocative act. The Iron Curtain was the defining symbol of global separation, and the Soviet Union represented the ultimate opposite to the western world. By implementing Russian originating words onto English grammar - using “golossa” for voice, “glazz” for eye, or “horrorshow” (from *khorosho*)² (Burgess, 1962) for good, Burgess created a hybrid dialect where the main specialty of it was that it suggested the idea that the ideological enemy had affected one of the main aspects of the British life, its language. This forms a dystopic scene where the characters speak a language that implies a totalitarian influence, even though the politics going on are never openly explained.

Besides these influences, Anthony Burgess, being a polyglot and a linguist¹ (Biswell, 2006), was very familiar with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: the theory that the structure of a language affects its speakers' world view. This concept is called linguistic relativity, and it suggests that concepts cannot be thought of if we do not have the words for them. By defining Alex's world via Nadsat, Burgess has created a character that has a morality that is limited by his vocabulary. To support this idea, Nadsat has a richness to it in violent terms but is very poor when it comes to moral concepts or feelings. By forcing the reader to adapt to this way of speaking, Burgess tests the hypothesis on his audience: if we speak the language of a psychopath, do we begin to think like one?

Furthermore, there is also an elegant flavor in Nadsat. Alex often uses archaic phrasing like “thou” or creates poetic rhythms that remind of Shakespeare, which are all phrases that elevate

him to a status above a common gangster. This fusion of “elegant” culture and tribal behaviour complicates the reader’s understanding of Alex. All these things combined, the fundamental starting point and foundation for this essay have been established.

Analysis Part 1: The Function of Nadsat

To answer the research question, we first need to understand how Nadsat works and functions as a dialect to capture the reader. As we established before, Nadsat is not just a stylistic approach to writing, it actually resembles a culture and world view. Structurally, Nadsat is a polyglot slang, primarily originating from Russian roots to the English language structure. Burgess creates a sort of dissonance between a foreign vocabulary and familiar grammar. Because of the influences of the Cold War, the vocabulary that mainly influenced the dialect is often associated to be from the Soviet enemy; words like *droog* (friend), *devotchka* (girl), *malchick* (boy), and *gulliver* (head) are initially opaque to the average reader, though as the novel begins, this opacity serves as an alienation tool. The reader is basically put in a world where they are the outsider, and they can’t comprehend the happenings of the scene without major effort.

This process of learning Nadsat somewhat resembles the concept of an “initiation ritual”. According to anthropology, initiation rituals more often than not include a period of confusion, followed by the receiving of the secret knowledge that allows entry to the group, cult or organization. In this context, the Nadsat vocabulary can be put in the context of a “secret knowledge” that the reader acquires as they progress through the first chapters of the novel. Words like “*tolchock*” might come as unrecognizable at first, but after many repetitions, the reader starts to understand the word subconsciously as “hit” or “beat”. By the middle of the

novel, the reader becomes very fluent in understanding how Alex talks and forms dialogues. With the achieved fluency, the reader has now inadvertently bonded with the mindset of the narrator.

This bond that is formed via linguistic ways brings complex circumstances with it. Because Nadsat is the primary and only way of connecting with Alex throughout the story, the reader is forced to adapt to the perspective of Alex to make sense of the happenings of the novel. The absence of a third narrator that doesn't provide moral justifications forces the reader to follow Alex and think like Alex. Nadsat is the only key to understanding the happenings of the novel and Alex himself. This is also an application of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis discussed in the previous sections: adopting Alex's vocabulary the reader is pushed towards his world view. We begin to see the world as a place far away from morals and empathy, and as a place that is home to "horrorshow" sensations.

Furthermore, the innocent and playful nature of Nadsat masks the actual reality of the ongoing content. The way Alex speaks Nadsat is often rhythmic, rhyming, and often humorous. It utilizes childish sounding words and phrases (e.g. eggweg, steaksy), which indirectly lightens the narrator and his actions. This linguistic approach weakens the reader, because it makes it a lot more difficult to feel full morality when the narrator speaks in a poetic and rhyming style. The language, as said before, acts as a filter that strips the events of their raw and realistic horror, and gives them a more stylized and theatrical feature.

Crucially, this function of Nadsat turns the reader into a member of Alex's friend group. Just as Alex and his "droogs" use the language to distinguish themselves from the boring, complaining adults of society, the reader uses their new Nadsat fluency to distinguish themselves from the others who can not comprehend it. To understand Nadsat is to be "in on the joke." This creates a unique form of empathy. We may question and disagree with Alex's actions, but we are intimately connected to his voice.

Analysis Part 2: Violence & Detachment

Having established that Nadsat functions as a tool or mechanism for complicity, the analysis must now turn to its specific role and application in depicting violence. *A Clockwork Orange* is a novel that is notorious for its description of scenes that involve major forms of violence, gore, and brutality; though the unique aspect of this novel's depiction of these scenes lies within how they are told and explained to the reader. The reader's experience of the violence in the novel is somewhat muted, and this comes from the filter role of the language itself. Burgess utilizes the power of Nadsat's "distancing effect" (kind of similar to Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* in theatre), where the audience is morally and emotionally detached from the actual happenings of the plot, because of the manipulation of the language used. This lightening effect of Nadsat actually serves as a dual purpose: it protects the reader from the trauma and shock of the events, while also exposing the terrifying ease and accessibility of violence and its normalization through linguistic features.

The main technique Burgess implements in the novel is the aestheticization of violence. By describing brutal and disturbing events using rhythmic, playful, or abstract terms, the text shifts the reader's focus from the morals of suffering to the stylistic aspect of the description. As an example, when Alex describes a fight scene, he does not use words like "punch," "bleed," or "scream," which are all words and phrases that trigger empathetic responses in the general audience. Instead, he uses terms like "tolchok"(hit) and describes the blood flowing like "krovvy". Consider the description of a beating: "we just sat there watching... while he swam in his own blood." The use of the metaphor "swam" transforms a horrifying injury into a surreal, almost cartoon-like image. The violence becomes a performance or a show, rather than a violation of a human being.

The masking role of Nadsat and its linguistic features can be seen many times in the way Alex describes his victims. They are most often reduced to just objects or comical characters through Nadsat, and very rarely humanized. An old woman is a "ptitsa" (bird), a man is a "chelloveck" (fellow/person, but used dismissively), and a girl is a "devotchka". By stripping the victims from their actual English labels and characterizations, such as mother, father, or child, Alex has indirectly distanced them from the social definition of the roles that they normally had. The reader, forced to follow Alex's world view and opinions, subconsciously participates in this dehumanization. We are not reading about a boy beating up an old man, we are reading about a *malchick tolchocking a starry chelloveck*, which distances the reader from moral judgment. The foreignness of the words act as a blocker in front of the actual emotional meanings of the events from being expressed.

Furthermore, the “high” register of Nadsat, elevates the violence to the realm of art. Its inclusion of biblical or Shakespearean rhyming and phrasing elevates the slang to something more than a street language. Alex, an enthusiast of classical music, describes the brutality the same way as he describes listening to Beethoven or Mozart. This association contrasts the violence with elegant culture, confusing the reader in the moral sense. We have always been directed to respect and admire high culture, art, and eloquence, though when these qualities are combined with sadist events of the novel, the reader is left in a state of dissonance regarding emotional thinking. We find ourselves admiring the expressiveness, while being horrified by the content. This is the core of Burgess’s manipulation: he proves that style can override substance. If the violence is written beautifully enough, the reader will keep reading. This detachment is crucial to the novel’s philosophical aspect. If Burgess had described the gore and brutality in standard realism, the reader would likely reject Alex’s view immediately. We would simply want him punished. However, because the violence is filtered through the poetic, rhythmic shield of Nadsat, our judgment is suspended.

In conclusion, the distancing effect of Nadsat is the main factor that drives the novel’s moral ambiguity. By turning gore into a linguistic and aesthetic experience, Burgess manipulates the reader’s standard perspective about the topic. He successfully diminishes our judgement, and forces us to follow an uncomfortable path that we are not used to. He establishes the truth that our empathy and morals are not absolute, but rather, subject to changing with various influences and manipulation, one of them being linguistics.

Analysis Part 3: Control, Freedom, & Moral Choice

The manipulation of language in *A Clockwork Orange* is not limited to the correlation between the reader and the novel itself, but rather, it is also present in the conflict between Alex and the state. If Nadsat represents the chaotic, violent properties of an individual, then the Standard English represents the dull, intimidating order of the totalitarian government. This section dives into how Burgess uses both the presence and absence of the dialect Nadsat to further strengthen his argument about moral choices and their relations to the freedom of self expression, and that removing someone's language is the same as separating them from their reality.

In the first part of the novel, Alex's narratives are driven by his creativity. Nadsat is not a static dialect, but rather, a fluid, poetic one that Alex uses intricately to impose his own world view on reality. He brings up metaphors, rhyming slang words, and poetic elegant phrasing throughout his narrative very frequently. This unique linguistic approach is how he prefers to see his life in general; committing evil acts and painting them with his own lyricism. His language is an act of rebellion against the conformity and ordinary nature of the socialist state he lives in. To the state, Alex is a problem to be solved; to himself, through his language, he is a "humble narrator," a king of his own domain. His habit to rename the world and its descriptions is a way of showing that his own personal experience is more important and valid than the objective reality defined by the others of society.

The significance of linguistics throughout the novel becomes very apparent when Alex gets caught and arrested after accidentally causing an old woman's demise. After being sent to prison, he is then selected as a test subject for a new form of "treatment" that is said to bring peace and

comfort by erasing the youth's aggressive habits by ultimately brainwashing them. While this procedure is happening, we start to see a contrast to the dialect of Nadsat we have gotten used to. As the doctors condition Alex to feel physical nausea and mental uneasiness at the sight of violence, they simultaneously weaken his linguistic habits. It is very obvious that the doctors and the government officials speak in a highly formal, bureaucratic form of Standard English. Their language is stripped of emotion, metaphors, or slang, leaving it purely functional. The chief scientist refers to Alex not as a boy or a man, but as "the subject". This formalized version of English contrasts strictly with the expressive nature of Nadsat. It represents a reality where emotions and ambiguity are erased, and only truth remains.

As the treatment goes on, Alex's ability to use the language he has been familiar with for so long starts to weaken. The state's administration of the Ludovico Technique, which is a procedure offered to Alex in exchange of having the remainder of his sentence erased. The Ludovico Technique is a form of therapy in which Alex is injected with nausea-inducing drugs while watching graphically violent films, eventually leaving him to feel severely ill at the slightest thought of violence. This treatment effectively forces Alex to witness the crimes he commits without the protection of his own lightening words and rhymes, indirectly muting his signature voice in the process. The text starts to be stripped of lyricism and sterile compared to the earlier parts, and the novel starts to lose one of its most unique aspects: the irreplaceable slang of the protagonist.

When Alex is released back into the society, he is technically said to be "cured", but in the process, he has lost his individuality. His descriptions of interactions with others using

increasingly standard phrasing, reflecting his loss of his voice. He has become a “clockwork orange”, organic on the outside but mechanical on the inside. The metaphor of the title is suddenly a lot more apparent: a man who speaks only as society permits him is not a man, but rather, a machine. If one can no longer choose to be bad, then his goodness is not a choice either, and therefore, is meaningless.

Analysis Part 4: Maturation and the Shedding of the Dialect

The final aspect of Nadsat lies beneath its utility in describing certain acts, and at its representation of identity, specifically the transition between adolescence to adulthood. While the majority of the novel implies that Nadsat is a symbol of rebellion and a way of showing connection to a culture, the final chapter reveals it to be just a phase of development. In the final chapter, Alex has escaped the influence of the Ludovico Technique, and has returned to his old self and old habits. However, he finds that he no longer enjoys nor desires violence, and importantly, he does not rely heavily on his old dialect. The language that once served as his protection against the societal norms and his badge of the culture he belonged in, begins to fade naturally.

This linguistic shift says that Nadsat was ultimately tied to the immaturity of youth. Burgess suggests that the ultra violence and the slang were symptoms of energy without purpose. As Alex encounters a new generation of teenagers using another set of slang terms, he realizes that he has outgrown his own subculture. He describes feeling tired and begins to think about creating life and a family rather than destroying it. The fading of Nadsat reflects this internal growth. It implies that true moral choice is not just about the freedom to be evil, but the ability to choose

maturity and stability over the chaotic thrill of the "droog" lifestyle. Thus, the ultimate function of the language is to describe a specific stage of human development: a violent, energetic, explosion that inevitably burns itself out.

Conclusion

To sum everything up, *A Clockwork Orange* remains as a crucial piece of art in the study of English literature not because of its controversial plot, but for its intricate manipulation of language. The Nadsat dialect is one of the novel's primary features, being the engine which drives the reader's perspective, distancing them from the terror of violence, and symbolizing the protagonist's fight for free will. Through the invention of this teenager slang, Burgess successfully pushes the reader into the mind of a sociopath with a sociopathic mindset, forcing them to view the world through a lens that distorts traditional morality.

This essay has demonstrated that Nadsat functions as a shield, protecting the reader from the actual reality and horror behind Alex's crimes, while simultaneously acting as a tool that makes us join in these actions. The "cure" for Alex is directly the source for the removal of his creative language, supporting the idea that the freedom to speak in one's own voice is the fundamental quality of humanity, even if that voice is used for destruction.

Ultimately, Burgess's linguistic experiment serves as a warning for ages to come. In a contemporary world increasingly damaged by manipulation of information and specific internet areas that define various groups and subcultures, the lessons of Nadsat are more relevant than ever. The novel reminds us that language has the power to dehumanize, to lighten or darken, and

to control thought. We are all familiar with the concept of free will and speech, and its effects on others; though the challenge is to recognize when the language we speak is no longer our own.

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