

ENGLISH B

EXTENDED ESSAY

Category 3 Literature

Examining the Aestheticization of Violence in Anthony Burgess's "A Clockwork Orange"

Word Count: 3997

Research Question: How does the aestheticization of violence characterize the moral detachment of the narrator in Anthony Burgess' "A Clockwork Orange"?

Contents

Introduction	3
Nadsat and the Linguistic Neutralization of Violence	5
Musical Imagery and the Transformation of Violence into Pleasure	7
The Transformation of Brutality into Artistic Imagery	11
Conclusion	16
Bibliography	18

Introduction

Nietzsche's claim in *The Birth of Tragedy* that "it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified" suggests that the depravity of violence can be concealed by the dangerous power of beauty, capable of romanticising even the most heinous acts and distorting one's sense of reality (Nietzsche, 1872). Aestheticization refers to the process whereby reality is reframed to appreciate its aesthetic qualities, where its perceived beauty, form and sensory qualities take priority over any moral or ethical consideration. Nietzsche's philosophy highlights the dangers of the human tendency to view the environment through an aesthetic lens, warning of its power to subvert moral reasoning. When extended to violence, the otherwise serious emotional impact of witnessing such acts would be reinterpreted merely as entertaining aesthetically pleasing spectacle.

Using Nietzsche's framework as a heuristic lens, Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* is a demonstration in how this aesthetic veil can be constructed through linguistic play and artistic references that obscure violent acts by filtering them through a lens of aesthetic indulgence that avoids moral judgment. Set in a near-future dystopian Britain, the novel portrays a society in which unfettered youth violence is widespread and while the state prioritizes oppressive forms of social control in the absence of any consensus regarding moral norms and standards.

The novel is narrated by Alex, a fifteen-year-old protagonist who leads a double life. On the surface he appears as a typical day-to-day teenager with a veneer of respectability. However, at night Alex is a leader of a gang (his 'droogs') who regularly engage in depraved violent acts such as mugging elderly citizens, brutal home invasions and even rape, terrorising innocent victims as mere casual recreation. This depravity, however, stands in stark contrast against how Alex presents himself intellectually, as a cultured individual with a poetic voice, an aficionado of classical music with a refined aesthetic sensibility. It is through these aesthetic indulgences

that Alex constructs a worldview which directly shapes both his perception and portrayal of violence or as Höyng notes, a "staged art of violence, as a superior form of self-expression" (Höyng, 2011). Consequently, his crimes and malevolent intentions are not narrated through a moral, or even an objective lens, but rather in a narrative tone that is saturated with intense and romantic sensory imagery.

This investigation adopts a close textual analysis of *A Clockwork Orange*, focusing on passages that most clearly illustrate Alex's aestheticized narration of violence. The excerpts below are related to violent scenes narrated early in the story, reflective moments where Alex articulates his aesthetic perspective, and inner monologues where Alex revisited previous violent scenes. The passages were chosen due to their relevance in demonstrating how the ways aestheticization shapes Alex's perception of brutal violence.

All quotations are taken from the Penguin Essentials edition of Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (Penguin Books, 2011), and page numbers refer to this edition throughout the essay. For the purpose of clarity and linguistic consistency, all definitions and translations of Nadsat terminology provided in the essay are sourced from *The Nadsat Dictionary* (The Kubrick Site, n.d.) unless otherwise stated. Secondary critics are incorporated primarily to support and contextualize the close textual analysis of Burgess' narrative techniques. This essay will explore the narration of *A Clockwork Orange* through the lens of Nietzsche's assertion on the power of the aesthetics to conceal depravity. It will investigate how aestheticization characterises the moral detachment of the key protagonist and transforms acts of brutality into experiences of pleasure rather than ethical transgression, exploring three key aesthetic pillars: Firstly, the linguistic pillar and the use of sociolect called 'Nadsat' as well as other linguistic choice. Secondly, the auditory pillar in the narrator's engagement with and appreciation of

classical music. Finally, the visual pillar shows us how the narrator perceives his environment through an appreciation of art.

Nadsat and the Linguistic Neutralization of Violence

The first form of aestheticization is concerned with language and how the narrator is able to distance himself from and even beautify horrific violence through a very particular representation of language. The primary method of achieving this lies in Alex's use of 'Nadsat', a constructed teenage argot derived from Anglicized Russian roots and exclusive to Alex and his droogs. However, rather than functioning as a neutral means of communication, Nadsat acts as a filter that blurs the impact of the description of violent acts. Kayaaltı states that Alex's inclination for "manipulat[ing] language... generate[s] an abundance of interpretive possibilities..." (Kayaaltı, 2025). It is through this obscuring the meaning of words through multiple interpretations that the narrator blurs the true meaning of violence that would otherwise carry greater semantic impact with the use of familiar, established words. In addition, Hugo claims that "...by muffling Alex's violence behind the euphemism of Nadsat, readers do not have to fully face up to the implications of [Alex's] antisocial behavior..." (Hugo, 2025).

Through Nadsat, Alex is able to both lexically and grammatically create a distance between himself and the violence he perpetrates. Firstly, familiar expressions to describe violence that might typically provoke a moral response are replaced by unfamiliar utterances, thereby obscuring violence through emotional neutralisation. For example, when Alex recounts an assault on an elderly woman, he narrates:

“I got up on to my nogas¹, and there was this nasty vindictive starry forella² (trout)with her wattles ashake and grunting as she like tried to lever herself up from the floor, so I gave her a malenky³ fair kick in the litso⁴, and she didn’t like that, crying: “Waaaaah,” and you could viddy⁵ her veiny mottled litso going purplewurple where I’d landed the old noga” (Burgess, 2011, 47-48).

In this instance, the replacement of visceral established words such as "foot" or "face" with the unfamiliar sounding words such as "nogas" and "litso" creates a linguistic barrier between the physical act and its moral consequence, which has the effect of numbing any kind of moral response to the descriptions of violence.

In addition to this semantic distancing, Alex employs euphemisms to further mask the gravity of his actions by reducing them to mechanical or mundane descriptions. This is particularly evident in his reference to the act of rape:

“All right, I do bad, what with crasting⁶ and tolchocks⁷ and carves with the britva⁸ and the old in-out-in-out⁹, and if I get loveted¹⁰, well, too bad for me, O my little brothers...” (Burgess, 2011, p. 31).

Here, ‘the old in-out in-out’ refers to rape as an action that is purely a rhythmic and repetitive physical motion, turning its deeper meaning into a mechanical sequence that lacks ethical

¹ noga: foot, leg (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

² forella: trout (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

³ malenky: little (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

⁴ litso: face (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

⁵ viddy: to see (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

⁶ crast: to steal (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

⁷ tolchock: to hit (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

⁸ britva: razor (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

⁹ in-out-in-out: sex (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

¹⁰ loveted: caught (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

significance. As Hugo asserts, this euphemistic language “function[s] as an ‘ethical bleach’ that washes out ethical implications” (Hugo, 2025). Beyond distancing, Alex’s language also incorporates a “reminiscence of the baby babbling” (Jimenez, 2016), which has the effect of infantilizing violent acts:

“I had just ticklewickled his fingers with my britva, and there he was looking at the malenky dribble of krovvy¹¹ that was redding out in the lamplight.” (Burgess, 2011, p. 41)

By such reduplications such as ‘ticklewickled’, Alex mimics the phonetic patterns of how parents speak to infant children and is therefore able to render a violent act merely as playful encounters. The result of this linguistic reframing is that the suffering of a victim being mutilated is diminished and conveyed as harmless and playful.

Ultimately, these linguistic techniques combine to create an aesthetic veil that shields the narrator from the nature of his violent acts. Alex achieves this by use of Nadsat and unfamiliar word choice, euphemistic child-like language and flamboyant imagery, all of which within grammatically simple sentences, effectively neutralizing violent acts, whereas more typical descriptions would convey its severity. Through neutralization of violence, Alex is able to carry out his depraved activities in a way that evades moral judgment.

Musical Imagery and the Transformation of Violence into Pleasure

While Nadsat and other linguistic choices provide an aesthetic structure necessary for Alex to detach from the nature of violence, classical music offers a justification for violence on a deeper emotional level. Music holds a privileged place in Alex’s sensory world. This is exemplified

¹¹ krovvy: blood (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

in how he reacts to his enjoyment of music being interrupted in how he “get[s] all bezoomy when any veck interferes with a ptitsa singing,” reveals how intense his dependency on music is and how protective he is over it, with “bezoomy” meaning a feeling of irritability and loss of control. Although music is not merely something Alex enjoys, but rather as force that both motivates, justifies and elevates his violence to an aesthetic peak towards a kind of spiritual transcendence.

Firstly, as with Alex’s ornate lexical choices to describe violence, his references to music also represent violence as though it is high culture. This is notable in the way encounters depicting bodily harm are conveyed through rhythm as though choreographed to music. Alex describes his movement during his physical confrontation with Billyboy, a rival gang leader, using the musical measures of the waltz:

“And, my brothers, it was real satisfaction to me to waltz—left two three, right two three—and carve left cheeky and right cheeky, so that like two curtains of blood seemed to pour out at the same time, one on either side of his fat filthy oily snout in the winter starlight”
(Burgess, 2011, p. 15).

This description “indicates the contrast between the beauty and grace of a dance and the violence of an attack.” (Kayaaltı, 2025), by reducing a brutal assault to a graceful motion, as the narrator synchronises the cutting his enemy’s face with the dance that gives the act a refined musical perception.

For Alex, the rhythm and grace he perceives in the act of violence takes precedence over everything else. The suffering of the victim and even his agency in carrying out the assault are not considered. Instead, he considers violence as musical performance and himself as a

conductor or choreographer who brings the performance to life. The exclamation “And, my brothers” further exemplifies this as he seems to address an audience spectating on the brutality.

After an evening of “ultra-violence”, Alex returns home and relaxes listening to classical music which prompts his imagination to conjure even more violent thoughts:

“After that I had lovely Mozart, the Jupiter, and there were new pictures of different litsos to be ground and splashed,” (Burgess, 2011, p. 27).

By describing violent imagery against a backdrop of a classical symphony, Alex gives violence a kind of artistic prestige commonly associated with high culture. The juxtaposition of depraved acts with music intended to evaluate the human spirit effectively nullifies the violence. As Schirmacher notes, when “high-valued art music appears in a context of negatively connoted violence and destruction, positive and negative evaluations are simultaneously present and may produce attitudinal ambivalence” (Schirmacher, 2019).

As well as interpreting his violent actions in the role of a musical performer or choreographer, Alex also views his violence through the lens of a critic. Alex’s indulgence in a symphony after another violent escapade causes him to revisit and critique the evening’s brutality with intricate vocabulary. He replays the incident of ransacking a married couple’s house and raping the homeowner in front of her husband:

“Listening to the J. S. Bach, I began to pony better what that meant now, and I thought, slooshying¹² away to the brown gorgeousness of the starry German master, that I would

¹² slooshy: to listen, hear (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

like to have tolchecked them both harder and ripped them to ribbons on their own floor”
(Burgess, 2011, p. 27).

Instead of driving mere impulse and indulgence in a given moment, for Alex, violence becomes something to be replayed, refined and even aesthetically improved upon. His tendency to analyse his crimes aesthetically provides another layer of detachment the further shields Alex from any moral scrutiny and reflection.

In Alex’s narration, classical music seems to provoke a kind of spiritual transcendence with even religious connotations. As Alex describes the symphony in visceral terms such as “trombones crunched redgold” and “trumpets three-wise silverflamed” he describes it as ‘bliss’ and ‘heaven’, words typically linked with spiritual purification and ethical goodness. Since, for Alex, music serves as the catalyst to act out violence and a means to appreciate it, his reverence for a form of music normally supposed to elevate the spirit is further evidence of how the narrator subverts music to beautify violent acts. This distortion becomes explicit in his final ecstatic vision:

“And then there were devotchkas ripped and creeching¹³ against walls... and then when the music... rose to the top of its big highest tower... I broke and spattered and cried aaaaaaah with the bliss of it” (Burgess, 2011, p. 27).

Here, the music mirrors the escalation of violence, collapsing spiritual exaltation into physical violation. Music offers Alex a way of dehumanising his victims by making them no more than notes in a symphony and is another way he uses aestheticization that allows him to detach morally from the horrific nature of his crimes. Alex’s recounting his experiences in the nature

¹³ creech: to scream (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

of a musical critic adds a veneer of sophistication and high culture that both encourages violent actions and also filters them in a way that avoids their true nature resonating in his consciousness. Thus, music does not merely anesthetize moral judgement, it actually enables Alex to reach a kind of spiritual transcendence. Through Alex's references to music, Burgess exemplifies the "aesthetic phenomenon" that Nietzsche proposes can "justif[y]" almost any brutality. By subverting a form of expression typically supposed to civilize the human spirit, he instead makes it a tool for Alex to transcend morality entirely with the power to sanctify and heighten – but more disturbingly – sanctify acts of depravity. More than just saturating violence with aesthetic appreciation, for Alex, music serves the function of dulling his ability to reason altogether, putting him in a state where morality itself cannot exist.

The Transformation of Brutality into Artistic Imagery

As well as the linguistic and auditory, a third aspect of aestheticization provides Alex with a visual perspective that he uses to "glorify violence, framing it as a form of artistic expression" (Tadkod et al., 2025). Through this reframing, Alex interprets the environment around him as though it is an artistic or cinematic work, and to a series of two-dimensional compositions which allow him to view brutality "without placing moral judgments" as a "beautiful, spectacular theatre of violence." (Purić, 2017). This provides another aesthetic veil by which Alex is able to dehumanise his victims, in this case, by reducing them to mere 2-dimensional images and perceiving what would otherwise be visceral and traumatic events as dazzling artistic endeavour created to visually engage the viewer. Far more than just seeing something artistic in violence, Alex's artistic interpretations of violence make him a spectator of brutality rather than a participant and absolves him of moral accountability.

A striking example of how Alex uses visual spectacle to detach from reality is in how he reframes the sight of blood:

“...so that like two curtains of blood seemed to pour out at the same time, one on either side of his fat filthy oily snout in the winter starlight. Down this blood poured in like red curtains...” (Burgess, 2011, p. 15).

On describing a violent encounter with rival gang leader Billyboy, he represents blood from injury he inflicted as “like two curtains of blood seemed to pour out at the same time”. Here, Alex is using objects seen on a theatre stage to represent what should be a disturbing action, making his adversary’s face the stage on which he is viewing a performance. The repetition of the "curtain" metaphor suggests that Alex is not just observing a fight but is actively directing a visual production where human injury is merely a scenic effect. Alex further characterizes blood through visual imagery in subsequent confrontations:

“...our dear old droog¹⁴ the red-red vino on tap and the same in all places, like it’s put out by the same big firm—started to pour and spot the nice clean carpet and the bits of this book that I was still ripping away at, razrez¹⁵ razrez” (Burgess, 2011, p. 19).

Instead of seeing blood as a bodily fluid associated with life-changing trauma, Alex views it only as a certain pigment of a colour. Both of these descriptions of blood objectify the acts of violence repackages them as alternative visual stimuli and effectively dehumanises the victim. By comparing blood to "red-red vino on tap," Alex removes the biological reality of pain and replaces it with a consumerist or aesthetic commodity, treating the injury as a repetitive visual product "put out by the same big firm" rather than a unique human tragedy.

¹⁴ droog: friend (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

¹⁵ razrez: to rip (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

Alongside these descriptions of blood, Alex further uses lavish ornate language which adds a romantic artistic perspective to violent acts:

Pete and Georgie had good sharp nozh¹⁶, but I for my own part had a fine starry horrorshow¹⁷ cut-throat britva which, at that time, I could flash and shine artistic. So there we were dratsing¹⁸ away in the dark, the old Luna with men on it just coming up, the stars stabbing away as it might be knives anxious to join in the dratsing” (Burgess, 2011, p. 14).

In the same confrontation with Billyboy, he describes his weapon with flamboyant adjectives such as “fine starry horrorshow cut-throat britva”, emphasizing his ability to display it in a “flash and shine artistic” manner. Such descriptions transform a harmful object into something beautiful and awe-inspiring, present associations of violence as sources of visual aesthetic appreciation. Alex also uses natural beauty to convey brutal acts. As Alex describing an exhilarating build up to a violent act, he evokes natural beauty around him with “the old Luna with men on it just coming up” and to “stars stabbing away as it might be knives anxious to join in the dratsing”. Alex folds the natural world into the act of violence with the mind of an enthusiastic art critic appreciating a bucolic painting.

Alex’s artistic framing of his environment extends to the realm of cinema. He is preoccupied with "viddyng" (seeing) the environment around by appreciating its cinematic qualities. Many of Alex’s descriptions make reference to lighting and effects, taking on the vocabulary of a cinematographer lighting a film set:

¹⁶ nozh: knife (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

¹⁷ horrorshow: good, well (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

¹⁸ drat: to fight (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

“...and it was a nice malenky cottage, I’ll say that. We all went smecking¹⁹ into the room with a light on... there was this nice malenky statue that shone in the light of the room, and on a table was a typewriter and all papers scattered everywhere...” (Burgess, 2011, p. 18).

On the evening of a brutal home invasion perpetrated by Alex and his gang, he describes the “globe lights outside on iron stalks” outside a home, and when inside, the “nice malenky statue that shone in the light of the room”. Throughout this violent escapade, Alex is more concerned with the beauty of the scene than the violence he is perpetrating within it as he has cast him as a spectator of his own actions. Alex is able to represent a horrific scene of intense trauma as though it is a carefully lit film set. He highlights the “shining” quality of the room and the arrangement of its objects over any consideration about the victims or even his own role in the violent act, further evidencing how Alex prioritizes aesthetic composition over any moral question.

Alex’s ability to fill his visual field with artistic descriptions even acts as a kind of psychological buffer that protects him against his own trauma as well as obscuring that of his victims. When Alex is caught by the police, he is able to mentally detach from the discomfort by describing his environment as though it is a work of art:

“...saw in the lamplight also streaks of blood here and there like signatures, my brothers, of the night’s fillying²⁰” (Burgess, 2011, p. 25).

¹⁹ smeck: laugh (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

²⁰ filly: to play (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

The use of the word “signature” is significant as it implies artistic authorship of the crime scene, which makes it less a crime scene and more like an art exhibition. The finality of a signature to a great piece of artwork allows Alex to reinterpret the events and reclaim ownership of the interruption of his violent escapade.

The extent to which Alex makes sense of his reality as if by viewing it in two-dimensions is further evidence in how he fails to relate to the world around him without the lavish artistic descriptions of violence which he thrives on:

“It’s funny how the colours of the like real world only seem really real when you viddy²¹ them on the screen” (Burgess, 2011, p. 77).

While Alex is incarcerated in the State Institute for Reclamation and away from his usual day to day brutal activities, Alex seems unable to connect with reality around him without such visual stimuli, noticing how “the colours of the like real world only seem really real when you viddy them on the screen”. His admission highlights how detached Alex is from normal human experience, as he requires the artificial intensity of a screen to engage with his own environment.

Whether as an art critic, spectator or cinematographer, Alex’s detached nature can be seen as a created identity in order to defend his own autonomy in a system which attempts to turn him into a “clockwork orange” – a metaphor in the story that alludes to the conflict between a state that attempts to turn something organic into a predictable machine. As Alex sees the violence, he carries out a visual spectacle and he is able to stay behind the

²¹ viddy: to see (“The Nadsat Dictionary” n.d.)

camera rather than having an active role in front of it. In the role of cinematographer, Alex is able to repurpose acts which are chaotic and destructive and create the illusion of a higher purpose. It is through this intense visual aestheticization that Burgess shows us how the narrator is able to blur the lines between high culture and violent depravity, thereby providing him with a safe moral detachment from his brutality.

Conclusion

In *A Clockwork Orange*, Anthony Burgess utilizes the aestheticization of violence to facilitate the moral detachment of the story's narrator, obscure the brutality of his actions, and transform them into a source of aesthetic enjoyment through which he avoids ethical and moral judgment. This moral detachment is achieved through a complete system consisting of three key methods: linguistic choices, appreciation of music, and an artistic perspective. By combining these forms, "the violent scenes in *A Clockwork Orange* are devised as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* but delivered in the spirit of pure visual pleasure common to the traditional Baroque unity of architecture, sculpture and painting" (Purić, 2017). Like a complete work of art, Alex orchestrates his crimes by blending different artistic mediums: he uses Nadsat slang to create semantic distance, classical music to drown out moral resonance in a sensory overload, and the detached lens of a movie critic to dehumanise his victims into a visual spectacle. Altogether, these methods function as a comprehensive aesthetic veil that can transform brutal acts into pure sensory indulgence. By characterising this system for aestheticizing violence, the novel allows Alex total moral detachment from the true nature of his crimes, and enables him to perpetrate heinous acts without having to morally connect with their implications. Therefore, the novel shows us how Nietzsche's statement that existence "is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon" can be realised in society. Burgess shows us how human beings can avoid any moral accountability by perceiving the world as though it is a

canvas or a movie set, subverting depravity by representing it as high art. This serves as a broader illustration of how beauty can be used to romanticise depravity, where aesthetic appreciation is able to sanctify even the most heinous of actions.

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