LITERATURE & ARTS

who wrote a clockwork orange

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Quick Takeaways

- Author: John Anthony Burgess Wilson (known as Anthony Burgess).
- Published: 1962.
- Key Innovation: The creation of 'Nadsat,' a fictional argot blending English and Russian.
- Core Theme: The essential importance of free will over state-mandated 'goodness.'
- The Controversy: The differing endings between the UK and US editions and the subsequent Stanley Kubrick film.

When asking **who wrote A Clockwork Orange**, the immediate answer is Anthony Burgess. However, understanding the man behind the ultra-violence, the milk bars, and the linguistic gymnastics of Nadsat requires a deep dive into the mid-20th-century literary landscape. This masterclass explores Burgess's life, his motivations, the philosophical underpinnings of his most famous work, and why it remains one of the most polarizing and studied novels in English literature.

Section 1: The Life of Anthony Burgess (1917–1993)

Early Life and Influences

Born John Anthony Burgess Wilson in Manchester, England, in 1917, Burgess was raised in a Catholic household. His childhood was marked by tragedy; his mother and sister died during the 1918 flu pandemic while he was an infant. This early exposure to loss and the rigid moral framework of his Catholic upbringing deeply influenced his later explorations of good, evil, and original sin. Burgess was a polymath from the start, showing immense talent in music, linguistics, and literature. He viewed himself primarily as a composer who happened to write novels, often stating that he was 'a musician who writes, rather than a writer who plays music.'

The Turning Point: The 1959 Diagnosis

The genesis of *A Clockwork Orange*is often linked to a dramatic period in Burgess's life. In 1959, while serving as a colonial officer in Brunei and Malaysia, he collapsed. Doctors diagnosed him with an inoperable brain tumor and gave him only a year to live. Desperate to provide financial security for his wife, Lynne, Burgess embarked on a frantic writing spree, producing five and a half novels in a single year. Ironically, the diagnosis was incorrect, and Burgess lived for another 34 years, but the sense of urgency and the meditation on mortality stayed with him, fueling the creative fire that produced his masterpiece in 1962.

Section 2: The Genesis of A Clockwork Orange

The Trauma of 1944

While the 'tumor year' provided the professional impetus, the emotional core of *A Clockwork Orange*was rooted in a horrific real-life event. In 1944, during the London blackout, Burgess's pregnant wife was assaulted by four American deserters. She suffered a miscarriage and permanent health issues as a result. Burgess was away on military service at the time and felt a profound sense of helplessness and rage. This trauma directly informed the scenes of 'ultra-violence' in the novel, particularly the attack on the writer Alexander and his wife. It was Burgess's attempt to process the senselessness of violence through a literary lens.

The Visit to the Soviet Union

In the early 1960s, Burgess visited Leningrad. He observed the 'stilyagi'—rebellious Russian teenagers who adopted Western styles. This observation, combined with the rise of 'Teddy Boys' in Britain, led Burgess to conceptualize a futuristic youth subculture that was both terrifying and sophisticated. To give these characters a unique voice, he drew upon his linguistic skills to create Nadsat.

Section 3: Decoding Nadsat – The Language of Alex DeLarge

One of the most remarkable feats in 20th-century literature is Burgess's creation of **Nadsat**. Rather than using contemporary slang that would quickly become dated, Burgess synthesized English with Russian loanwords to create a timeless, alien, yet oddly rhythmic dialect.

Why Use Nadsat?

Burgess had two primary goals for Nadsat:

1. Brainwashing the Reader: By the end of the first few chapters, the reader begins to understand the slang without a glossary. This subtly mimics the 'conditioning' experienced by the protagonist, Alex.
2. Softening the Violence: By describing horrific acts in a fictional language (e.g., 'tolchock' instead of 'hit'), Burgess creates a distancing effect, allowing the reader to focus on the aesthetic and philosophical elements rather than just the gore.

A Glossary of Essential Nadsat Terms

Nadsat Word	English Meaning	Russian Origin
Apparat	Equipment/Device	Apparat
Baboochka	Old woman/Grandmother	Babushka
Bezoomny	Mad/Crazy	Bezumny
Droog	Friend	Drug
Gully	Throat	Gorlo
Horrorshow	Good/Fine	Khorosho
Moloko	Milk	Moloko
Tolchock	To hit/punch	Tolchok

Section 4: The Core Philosophical Conflict – Pelagius vs. Augustine

Burgess wasn't just writing a thriller about teen gangs; he was engaging in a centuries-old theological debate between Pelagianism and Augustinianism. This debate centers on whether humans are inherently good and capable of choosing salvation (Pelagius) or inherently sinful and reliant on divine grace (Augustine).

The Argument for Free Will

The central question of the novel is: **Is a man who is forced to do good still a man?**When Alex undergoes the Ludovico Technique—a form of aversion therapy that makes him physically ill at the thought of violence—he ceases to be a moral agent. He is 'good' by reflex, not by choice. Burgess argues that it is better to be a human being who chooses to be evil than to be a 'clockwork orange'—something organic and alive on the outside, but mechanical and programmed on the inside.

Section 5: The Controversy of the 21st Chapter

Perhaps the most significant chapter in literary history is the one that was missing from American editions for decades. *A Clockwork Orange*consists of 21 chapters (divided into three sections of seven). Burgess chose the number 21 because it represents the age of maturity.

The UK vs. US Editions

In the original UK version, the 21st chapter shows Alex growing bored with violence. He sees an old friend who has married and settled down, and Alex realizes he wants the same. This 'redemption' arc suggests that violence is a phase of youth that one naturally outgrows. However, Burgess's American publisher, Eric Pinker, insisted on cutting this chapter, believing that American readers would prefer a darker, more cynical ending where Alex returns to his old ways. This truncated version ended with Alex's recovery and the line, 'I was cured all right,' which took on a much more sinister meaning without the final chapter.

The Impact of the Missing Chapter

Because Stanley Kubrick based his 1971 film on the American edition, the cinematic Alex remains a villainous figure to the end. This led to a lifelong frustration for Burgess, who felt that his message about the organic growth of

the human soul was lost to the public's appetite for cynicism.

Section 6: Stanley Kubrick’s Film Adaptation

While Burgess wrote the book, Stanley Kubrick defined its visual legacy. The 1971 film is a masterpiece of cinema, but it created a complicated relationship between the author and the filmmaker.

Visual Stylization

Kubrick’s use of ultra-wide lenses, classical music (specifically Beethoven’s Ninth), and the iconic costume design (the bowler hats and eyelashes) made Alex an anti-hero icon. This stylization, however, was criticized for 'glamorizing' violence—something Burgess had tried to avoid through the distancing effect of Nadsat.

Burgess’s Reaction

Initially, Burgess defended the film, but as time passed and the film was blamed for 'copycat' crimes in Britain (leading Kubrick to pull it from UK distribution), Burgess grew resentful. He felt the film overshadowed his entire literary career. He even wrote a play version of *A Clockwork Orange*that included a character who looked like Kubrick being kicked off the stage, showing his desire to reclaim his narrative.

Section 7: Step-by-Step Analysis: How to Read A Clockwork Orange

For students and new readers, approaching this novel can be daunting. Follow these steps for a deeper understanding:

1. Read Without a Glossary: Don't stop to look up every Nadsat word. Allow the context clues to 'wash' over you. You will find yourself understanding the language naturally by Chapter 3.
2. Listen to the Rhythm: Burgess was a composer. Pay attention to the alliteration and the musicality of the prose. It is meant to be read with an 'ear' for the sounds.
3. Identify the Three Acts: Act 1 is the 'thesis' (Alex’s freedom to be evil). Act 2 is the 'antithesis' (The state’s power to enforce goodness). Act 3 is the 'synthesis' (The resolution of these forces).
4. Compare the Endings: If your copy has the 21st chapter, read it carefully. If it doesn't, find it online and reflect on how it changes your perception of Alex’s character.

Section 8: Comparative Analysis – A Clockwork Orange vs. Other Dystopias

Feature	A Clockwork Orange	1984 (Orwell)	Brave New World (Huxley)
Source of Control	Behavioral Conditioning	Totalitarian Surveillance	Biological & Social Engineering
Protagonist	Active Villain / Anti-hero	Oppressed Bureaucrat	Outsider / Discontented Citizen
Language	Nadsat (Inventive/Personal)	Newspeak (Restrictive/ State)	Hypnopaedic Phrases (Conditioning)
Ending	Growth or Regression	Total Defeat	Tragic Exile/Suicide

Section 9: Common Pitfalls and Misinterpretations

Many readers mistake Alex's justifications for Burgess's own views. While Alex is the narrator, Burgess is using him as a cautionary tool. Alex’s love for Beethoven does not make him 'cultured' in a moral sense; it highlights the terrifying reality that aesthetic appreciation and moral depravity can coexist.

Focusing solely on the 'ultra-violence' misses the theological debate. The book is an attack on 'behaviorism' (popularized by B.F. Skinner at the time), which suggested that humans could be 'conditioned' into a better society. Burgess viewed this as a threat to the human soul.

Section 10: Troubleshooting the Difficult Parts

- Struggling with the Slang? Read the first chapter aloud. The phonetic nature of Nadsat makes more sense when spoken.
- Confused by the 'Clockwork Orange' Metaphor? Think of a wind-up toy that looks like a fruit. It looks natural, but its movements are purely mechanical. That is Alex after the Ludovico Technique.
- Disturbed by the Content? This is intentional. Burgess wanted the reader to feel the horror of violence so they would have to confront the difficulty of defending the 'right' of a violent person to choose their path.

Section 11: The Enduring Legacy of Anthony Burgess

Burgess went on to write over 30 novels, including the massive *Earthly Powers*, but he could never escape the shadow of *A Clockwork Orange*. His influence is felt in:

- Music: From David Bowie’s 'Ziggy Stardust' stage sets to the lyrics of U2 and Sepultura.
- Linguistics: The concept of constructed languages (Conlangs) in fiction owes a debt to Nadsat.
- Cinema: The trope of the 'charming psychopath' was perfected in the depiction of Alex.

Conclusion: Why It Matters Today

In an era of algorithms and social credit systems, the question of whether we are being 'conditioned' into certain behaviors is more relevant than ever. Anthony Burgess’s masterpiece serves as a reminder that the messy, often dangerous freedom of choice is what makes us human. Whether you view Alex as a monster or a victim, the man who wrote his story—Anthony Burgess—remains one of the most vital intellectual figures of the 20th century.

Frequently Asked Questions

Tags: #anthony burgess #a clockwork orange #dystopian fiction #nadsat #literary analysis #stanley kubrick #modern classics