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HUMANISM VS. TERRORISM IN OSCAR WILDE’S TRAGEDY *VERA*, OR THE NIHILISTS

The article analyses Wilde’s insufficiently studied tragedy *Vera, or the Nihilists*, in which the author is among the first to meditate about the origins, the essence and the spread of nihilism, about the anti-human nature of this phenomenon and its transformation into terrorism. Wilde emphasized the conditional character of place and time in the play, thus drawing attention to the general laws of spreading nihilism, its essence, relations between conspirators and authorities. In the title Wilde reveals two possible ways of modern society, the path of humanism, or the path of nihilism. Wilde’s first play places him among the outstanding thinkers of the late 19th century. Wilde predicts a tragic downfall of the state because of those who strive for social changes by means of killing.

“new drama”, “*Vera, or the Nihilists*”, *tragedy, nihilism, terror, I.S. Turgenev.*

Paris attacks of 3 November 2015 which killed people of nineteen nationalities proved that questions of the origins and patterns of terrorist activities, unfortunately, remain relevant. Different parts of the world witness political assassinations, military take-overs, explosions, hostage-taking, deaths of innocent civilians which disseminate fear and destabilize society. These events force us to consider the causes of the attacks, personality traits of terrorists, activities of terrorist groups, the role of the state. The 21st century has sharpened the problem of international terrorism, but its origins can be traced back to the events of the 19th century. The causes of terrorism are manifold and complex. To study them requires interdisciplinary approach and into diverse fields of knowledge.

Modern legal science uses classical literary works to explore the depths of the human soul, the rules and conventions of co-existence of the individual and society. Literary text can be interesting to criminologists as they explore the impact on crime on society and victims as well, the origin and generation of opinions and individual perspectives. Scholars suggest to consider cultural studies of crime an independent field of criminology¹. Indeed, according to V.B. Zemskov, art “reflects transitions earlier than other ‘organs’ of culture”², it is able to anticipate developments, which is clearly shown by the literature of the late 19th century. Our interest to works written in this era is reasonable because studying the origins of this process allow us to better understand its laws.

¹ Бибик О.Н. Культурологический подход в криминологии // Вестник Омского университета. Серия: Право. 2010. № 3. С. 179–190.

² Земсков В.Б. Одноглазый Янус. Пограничная эпоха — пограничное сознание // Кануны и Рубежи. Типы пограничных эпох — типы пограничного сознания: материалы российско-французской конференции: в 2 ч. / отв. ред. В.Б. Земсков. М.: ИМЛИ РАН, 2002. Ч. I. С. 18.

I.S. Turgenev was one of the first to portray the image of a social reformer in his *Bazarov (Fathers and Sons, 1862)*. Oscar Wilde was convinced that life imitates art, it borrows situations and characters created by writers and artists in their works. “The Nihilist, that strange martyr who has no faith, who goes to the stake without enthusiasm, and dies for what he does not believe in, is a purely literary product. He was invented by Turgenev, and completed by Dostoevsky”, — Wilde wrote in his essay “*The Decay of Lying*” (1889)³.

At the turn of the 19th–20th centuries dramatic social and political changes excited everyone who thought about the prospects for the development of the civilization. For example, Henry James addresses the problem of anti-human nature of anarchism, the result of his observations was the novel *The Princess Casamassima*, 1886. Polish-born English novelist Joseph Conrad published in 1907 his novel *The Secret Agent*, which is considered to be one of the first canonical texts about terrorism⁴. Later in the novel *Under Western Eyes*, 1911, the writer continues reflections on revolutionary violence. The tradition of non-violent anarchism was developed in the literary works of the American writer Henry David Thoreau.

The end of the 19th century was marked by numerous assassination attempts on the rulers and their attendants’ lives both in Russia and in Western countries. A bomb was thrown at King Victor Emmanuel II of Italy, soon Neapolitan King Umberto I ran the danger of the armed assault, later there were two assassination attempts on the Kaiser Wilhelm I and the King Alfonso XII of Spain. Czar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881, the Empress Elizabeth of Austria — in 1898. The number of attempts on high-ranking officials grew in general.

Clashes with the authorities continuously occurred in Ireland, Wilde’s motherland. In 1880 William Gladstone became the Prime Minister of England, he didn’t keep his earlier promise to provide Ireland with self-government. In response, the peasant organization “Land League” imposed the campaign of boycott and deterrence of landowners, the government resorted to mass arrests. In the autumn of 1881 C.S. Parnell, a leader of the liberal part of the Irish society, accepted compromise conditions offered by Gladstone. That agreement resulted in higher activities of the terrorist groups in Ireland. English Minister for Ireland and his assistant were murdered, which aroused return repressions on the part of the government.

Wilde was keenly aware of the changes in social and political life of Europe, problems of advocating the oppressed and active struggle for justice: the writer’s mother Jane Francesca Wilde was one of the leaders of the national liberation movement in Ireland.

In 1880 Oscar Wilde wrote his first play *Vera, or the Nihilists*. Literary critics have constantly pointed to the contradictions and improbability of dramatic images; lack of characters’ social causality, discrepancies in the geographical, psychological and compositional aspects. Wilde was criticized for too protracted dialogues, lack of

³ Collected Works of Oscar Wilde. The Plays, the Poems, the Stories and the Essays including *De profundis*. London: Wordsworth Edition Limited, 1997. P. 934.

⁴ Ward I. Towards a Poethics of Terror. URL: <http://lch.sagepub.com/content/4/2/248> Downloaded from lch.sagepub.com at Vyatka State Humanities Uni. on June 6, 2013.

action, boredom of grave reflections, constraint of the characters' speeches, melodramatics and general improbability of actions, disregard to the theatrical laws. This abundance of violations makes us rethink the accuracy of traditional commentaries and the sense Wilde put in his work.

The 21st century gives an opportunity to reconsider the drama unappreciated in the 20th century and to present a different interpretation.

The play presents the organization of Russian nihilists, who are involved in terrorist activities. The mastermind of the movement is Vera Saburova, who entered alliance with conspirators to revenge for her brother exiled to Siberia. Nihilists are sure that the assassination of Czar Ivan may relieve public sufferings. The most human among conspirators is Alexei, a medical student, with whom Vera falls in love in spite of her oath. Alexei passionately stands up for people, he thinks massacres can't bring positive results and supports reforms. By chance, it is found out that Alexei is a student, but the Czar's son and the successor to the throne, however, the heroine believes in the sincerity of his philanthropic ambitions.

After the Czar's assassination Alexei takes the throne, but his program for political reorganization aimed at solving public problems, his hospitality and frankness are equally hateful to both courtiers and conspirators. Nihilists persuade Vera that Alexei is a traitor deserving death like his father. The lot of killing a new Czar falls to Vera, but she stabs herself to death.

Researchers can't definitely explain why Wilde chose the theme from the Russian history and Russian nihilism.

Some facts give grounds to suppose that the nihilism theme arises in the English playwright's creative work under I.S. Turgenev's influence. Wilde was likely to know E. Sklyer's translation of *Fathers and Sons*⁵, moreover, in the 1870s British magazines began to publish regular reviews of Russian literature. On June 17, 1879 the Russian writer visited Oxford University. P. Waddington mentions in his monograph *Turgenev and England* that Wilde's name was among the guests, however, there is no reliable information of their personal meeting⁶. At the same time in the article written specially for the newspaper *Utro Rossii* R. Ross shares his conversation with Wilde during holidays in Italy in June 1900. According to him the English writer made the acquaintance of Turgenev during his visit to England at D.G. Rossetti. Wilde asked Turgenev, why he hadn't entitled one of his novels *Kreml*, just because of wonderful sounding. Rossetti, to Wilde's mind, was excited, but Turgenev considered him a poser⁷. Thus, the meeting of two writers was possible and there are reasons to believe that the plot of the play was influenced by Wilde's acquaintance with the author of *Fathers and Sons*.

Nonetheless, Wilde's images of Russian nihilists are far from the historical ones. Apparently, the playwright didn't seek factual account, as he considered that it was more important to show the essence of the phenomenon. One of the main Wilde's

⁵ Waddington P. Ivan Turgenev and Britain. Oxford / Providence, USA: Berg, 1995. P. 216

⁶ Waddington P. Turgenev and England. London; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980. P. 263.

⁷ Росс Р. Несколько воспоминаний об Оскаре Уайльде // Утро России. 1913. 8 сент. С. 2.

aesthetic principles is that art is not a mirror of the life, the artist shouldn't reproduce life but create it.

Deliberately making the details which pointed to a scene or time of the action in the play absurd, Wilde emphasized their conventionality and focused attention on more crucial questions, such as the reasons of spreading nihilism and its essence, anti-human orientation of this phenomenon, relations between the conspirators and the authorities.

The conspirators take the vow time and again, which proclaims that to work more efficient they should abdicate humane aspirations, it is necessary "to suffer, destroy and revenge". In *The Will to the Power* F. Nietzsche had an accurate observation: "The predominance of sufferings over pleasure' or the opposite (hedonism): these two doctrines are already signposts to nihilism... For in both of these cases no ultimate meaning is posited except the appearance of pleasure or displeasure"⁸.

Verbally nihilists strive for progressive changes, for peasants liberation, but approaches to change the current situation are inhuman and, indeed, far from people. Wilde's biographers note that similar ideas were inherent in his mother. So, in one of her articles published in the newspaper "*Nation*" she openly called "to arms", but at the same time she didn't notice that there was no real public aspiration for a rebellion, people had no power, no energy, no interest to struggle⁹.

The greater part of nihilists is not aware and not interested in people's troubles, people don't need regicide itself. When Prince Paul Maraloffski comes to the plotters, he admits that he hates people, who stink of garlic, smoke wretched tobacco, get up early and eat only one dish at lunch. Nobody feels anxiety about these phrases, and the character joins the conspiracy easily.

Personal goals explain many other plotters' statements and actions. Nihilists blame Alexei for treason and insist on his assassination. But Vera tries to justify him breaking the usual pattern of actions. She not only makes changes in the plan but also prevents carrying out mercenary intentions. The conspirators are ready to renounce the recent leader, they call Vera a traitress. Michael and his allies remind of the heroine's feelings to her brother and her stung love for Alexei; they compel her to recognize the young Czar disloyal. In the sonnet *Libertatis Sakra fames* written in the same year as *Vera*, Wilde asserts:

Spite of this modern fret for Liberty
Better the rule of One, whom all obey,
Than to let clamorous demagogues betray
Our freedom with the kiss of anarchy¹⁰.

⁸ Nietzsche F. *The Will to the Power*. URL: http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/nietzsche_wtp01.htm

⁹ Melville J. *Mother of Oscar: The life of Jane Francesca Wilde*. London: Allison & Busby, 1999. P. 47.

¹⁰ *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*. P. 775.

Wilde presents the image of Ivan the Czar satirically, the state is controlled through an endless string of executions and pardons, the feeling of mechanicalness is accentuated by sturdiness of the Czar's decisions aimed at the maintenance of his own security. A distinguished feature of the Czar ruling is cruelty; methods of governance are uncivilized: denial of a reform way, bribery of malcontents, Czar's desire to get rid of the courts ("There are too many people in Russia, too much money spent on them, too much money on courts of justice")¹¹. Wilde doesn't show that Ivan the Czar or his courtiers care for the future of the country, the supreme power prevents in every possible way reformatory ideas. The playwright exaggerates the nonfeasance of the czarist government, but at the same time he focuses on the essence of the on-going processes.

Ernst Junger characterizing nihilism perspectives and its interrelation with the authorities wrote: "When a state turns into a nihilistic object, it provides for appearing mass parties in big cities, they function rationally and affectively at the same time. In case of success they can become so similar to the state, that it will be difficult to tell one from the other"¹². Thus, Michael reflects on the forthcoming victory and promises to find a position for Maralovsky, when, as he puts it, they "inflict terror" ("We will keep Prince Paul here, and find some office for him in our bloody reign of terror")¹³.

There is absolutely no spiritual source in the authorities' activities; ideas of good, humanity and justice are sunk into oblivion. It comes to the Czar declaring war on his people: "From this day I proclaim war against the people — war to their annihilation"¹⁴.

Neither the Czar nor his attendants do value ties of blood, Czar Ivan and his son take opposite ideological and moral stands, in spite they are the most immediate relatives. While persisting in his opinion, Alexei remains a darling son, but the Czar regards him as a successor aiming to seize the throne, before the death he accuses him:

CZAR is shot, and staggers back into the room.

CZAREVITCH (breaking from the guards, and rushing over): Father!

CZAR: Murderer! Murderer! You did it! Murderer! (*Dies*)¹⁵.

Gradually, the forefront is taken by Czarevitch Alexei. Like Eugene Bazarov from Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, he is called a medical student. Wilde indicates not only his social status, but as well his personal qualities. He is generous, merciful and gentle. Probably, these qualities allow the researchers to point the author's idealization of this image¹⁶.

¹¹ Ibid. P. 378

¹² Юнгер Э., Хайдеггер М., Кампер Д., Фигаль Г. Через линию // Судьба нигилизма. СПб.: Изд-во С.-Петербург. ун-та, 2006. С. 21.

¹³ Collected works of Oscar Wilde. P. 394.

¹⁴ Collected works of Oscar Wilde. P. 390.

¹⁵ Ibid. P. 390.

¹⁶ Knight G. Wilson. The golden labyrinth. A study of British drama. London: Phoenix house Limited, 1962. P. 306.

Where nihilist want to solve social problems by a terrorist way (in particular Michael), Alexei prefers to ‘pray’ and dreams of bloodless revolutions and reforms, he loves people sincerely and attempts to make their life better.

Alexis Ivanacievitch created by Wilde in the first play, was quite interesting for the author, that’s why he “prolonged his life” in his later works. The hero of *Vera* is evidently close to the characters of the tales of the first and second collections (*The Happy Prince and Other Tales, A House of Pomegranates*). First of all, these are the images of the Happy Prince and the Young King, who are distinguished by kindness, charity and a genius of deep self-sacrificing love.

Wilde shows interrelations between nihilists and the authorities as an exclusive circle, cruelty of the government engenders reciprocal cruelty of the revolutionaries, which, in turn, makes the authorities take drastic measures again... This historical conformity is illustrated in *Vera*. Wilde believes the way out is in the appeal to moral values, reliance on love, faith, charity and humanity.

Prevailing of the humanistic tendencies in the play is emphasized by the title and the conflict. We consider that the playwright underscores the Latin origin of the words ‘Vera’ and ‘Nihilist’ opposing their meanings. This suggestion changes the point of view on the subject matter of the play, and many problems appear in a new interpretation.

The name of Wilde’s main heroine is considered to remind Vera Figner, Vera Zaslulich and even Vera from the novel *What is to be done?* by Chernyshevsky (although A. Bird writes about the lack of credible evidence that Wilde knew this novel¹⁷).

Literature is full of examples, when authors are eager to use semantic opportunities of the ancient languages. Let’s give only two examples referring to the 1870s. Thus, since a well-known sonnet *Vowels* by A. Rembo appeared different interpretations have arisen, they are analyzed in the research of T.V. Sokolova “One more interpretation of the sonnet *Vowels* by Artur Rembo”, where the author gives a new explanation of the work. T.V. Sokolova argues that Rembo called letters of the Greek alphabet in his sonnet, where vowels were ranged from Alpha to Omega. The poet notes “the stages of comprehending essence, mystery of what is revealed in natural phenomena and perceived by people on the sensory level first, and then — sometimes and not by everyone, only by the selected ones — on the level of metaphysical clairvoyance”¹⁸. Thus, the suggestion about using the letters of not the French, but the Greek alphabet by the talented poet Artur Rembo yields good results and lets make a conclusion that the sonnet *Vowels* is the expression of his philosophy of creative work, a programme work written in a new poetic language.

There is a story with the title *Vera* by the French author Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adan. N.I. Balashov and E.A. Gunst give interesting for us commentaries on the

¹⁷ Bird, A. The plays of Oscar Wilde. Printed in Great Britain by Clarke Doble & Brendon Ltd Plymouth and London, 1977. P. 21.

¹⁸ Соколова Т.В. Еще один опыт интерпретации сонета Артюра Рембо «Гласные» // Известия Академии наук. Серия литературы и языка. 1998. Т. 57, № 2. С. 44.

work: “It’s almost evident, Villiers was aware of multilayer and paradoxical symbolism of the title, i.e. he understood both the meaning of the Russian name *Vera*... and what it means in Latin, ‘true [events]’, and the future tense of the French verb, voir’ — verr’ and, at last, that it is consonant with the last name of the famous Italian-French hegelian Vera, whose thoughts were reflected in this story as well”¹⁹. It’s impossible to imagine that Wilde, who knew Latin perfectly well since his studies in Portora and who titled many of his poems in Latin, didn’t use semantic opportunities of the words represented in the title.

The forms *vero*, *vere*, *veritas* and others are connected with meanings ‘veritable’, ‘truthful’, ‘real’. M. Fasmer points out that one of the meanings of the word ‘vera’ is close to Old Higher German WĀRA ‘truth’, ‘loyalty’, ‘mercy’, Old Icelandic vār ‘vow, solemn promise’, Old Higher German WĀR ‘true, loyal’, Old Irish *fír* ‘true, real’, Latin *vērus* ‘veritable, truthful’²⁰. P.Y. Chernykh says also about linguistic affinity of Gothic, Old Higher German, Old English, Old Icelandic, Latin roots and their meanings ‘honesty’, ‘truth, justice’, ‘union, promise, fidelity, friendship’, ‘agreement, oath’ etc.²¹.

The history of the term ‘nihilism’ goes back in centuries too. V. Kraus writes that this term is ancient enough, and can be traced back to Latin ‘nihilum’ which means “not a little bit”. Augustine “called people, who believe in ‘nothing’ nihilists (nihilisti); later the word ‘nihilianista’ denoted heretics, people, who trust in nothing or have ‘false’ faith”²².

The title of the play reflects the essence of the inner conflict connected with searches for the truth and the heroine’s choice. The external conflict is formed on Vera’s desire to revenge for the brother.

Wilde is a master of not only a paradox of words, but a paradox of the plot as well. The prologue ends with Vera’s words: “You shall be revenged!” Since this moment the conflict gains the author’s typical interpretation emphasizing his disapproval of hackneyed ideas and actions. In many works and critical essays Wilde points that renunciation of one’s own ‘ego’ is a deadlock bringing to degradation or death. In *Vera* the heroine-avenger is forced to stab herself instead of assassinating Alexei: she realizes too late how false the way chosen by her and the common line of actions by nihilists-plotters.

The inner conflict is connected with the opposition reflected in the title *Vera, or nihilists*, i.e. problem of choice between faith, trust, love (the main heroine) and terror, design of thoughts and acts, wealth (nihilists). The matter is not about certain characters only: here are the author’s considerations of the ways of the development of modern society’s, the choice of the generation.

¹⁹ Балашов Н.И., Гунст Е.А. Примечания // Вилье де Лиль-Адан О. Жестокие рассказы. М., 1975. С. 215.

²⁰ Фасмер М. Этимологический словарь русского языка: в 4 т. / под ред. и с предисл. Б.А. Ларина. Т. 1: А–Д. М.: Прогресс, 1986. С. 292–293.

²¹ Черных П.Я. Историко-этимологический словарь современного русского языка: в 2 т. Т. 1: А–Пантомима. М.: Русский язык, 1993. С. 141.

²² Краус В. Нигилизм сегодня, или Долготерпение истории. Следы рая. Об идеалах. М.: Радуга, 1994. Р. 20.

Wilde emphasizes Vera's false beliefs by intensification of rhetoric and emotion in her words. The heroine's speech loses its naturalness and sincerity. Vera says that Charlotte Corday's spirit awakes within her ("Methinks the spirit of Charlotte Corday has entered my soul now"²³). But according to Wilde it's not a positive feature, for now the heroine repudiates herself and acts by a pattern. The lovers meet, Vera bursting with passion thrusts a poison dagger into herself and dies saying that she has saved Russia. Thereby, Wilde keeps on developing the idea that one who loses faith loses everything. Comparing generosity and nobility of Alexei and cruelty, selfish indifference, hypocrisy of plotters, the heroine prefers Czarevitch and his priorities, this choice coincides with the heart choice, but it happens too late.

Till nowadays Wilde's play under review was treated by critics as a feeble attempt to expose the theme of Russian terror. But the play is not only about the strife between the duty and passion, Russian terrorists and conspirators. The nihilism theme appears in Wilde's heritage not accidentally; nihilism was a wide-spread phenomenon in Russia and a well-discussed subject in the West. Many ideas presented in *Vera* have common features with thoughts and statements of *The Will to Power* by Friedrich Nietzsche. The main difference is Wilde's attitude to humanistic values, which are able to overcome cruelty, self-interest, pessimism, evil of nihilism. The playwright doesn't not just criticize the orientations to rebel and violate, he creates positive characters, who embody his point of view.

The title of the play (*Vera, or the Nihilists*) is likely to have a deeper meaning than it's usually thought. Vera — is not only the name of the main female character, associated with the names of Vera Figner and Vera Zasluch. The title gives emphasis to both conflict of the heroine with her like-minded fellows and her own inner choice. Wilde demonstrates that blind compliance with canon, lack of confidence in oneself, lack of faith and frankness are destructive for a person and ruin him spiritually or even physically. On the other hand, Vera or 'truth' is opposed to nihilism 'unbelief', and this level of the play has a nature of a philosophical meditation about objective laws and prospects of Wilde's contemporary civilization.

Wilde evaluates negatively the conspirators' activities as well as the official government. Identical inhuman and selfish principles followed by nihilists and government may give them the same status. One can opt neither for plotters nor for the authorities, for both of them are equally cold-hearted and indifferent to the destiny of people and the state. Probably, the writer associates the two opposed parties into one concise word 'nihilists'.

Thus, Wilde was among the first to address the topic of terrorism and predicted the tragic death of the state at the hands of those who seek social change through murder. Nowadays, due to the growing problem of international terrorism, Wilde's play is still of current concern. The playwright stressed that universal moral values should take the foreground in resolving conflicts.

²³ Collected works of Oscar Wilde. P. 398.

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ГУМАНИЗМ ПРОТИВ ТЕРРОРИЗМА В ТРАГЕДИИ О. УАЛЬДА «ВЕРА, ИЛИ НИГИЛИСТЫ»

В статье рассматривается малоизученная трагедия О. Уайльда «Вера, или Нигилисты», в которой писатель одним из первых в мировой литературе серьезно заявляет о проблемах истоков, распространения и сути нигилизма, антигуманной направленности этого явления и его трансформации в терроризм. Уайльд подчеркивал условность времени и места действия, тем самым он заострял внимание на общих закономерностях распространения нигилизма, его сути, взаимоотношений заговорщиков с властями. В заглавии Уайльд обнажает два возможных пути становления современного ему общества, это путь гуманизма или путь нигилизма. Уже первая пьеса ставит писателя в один ряд с выдающимися мыслителями конца XIX века. Уайльд, одним из первых обратившийся к теме террора, предсказал трагическую гибель государства от рук тех, кто добивается социальных преобразований путем убийств.

“новая драма”, “Вера, или Нигилисты”, трагедия, нигилизм, террор, И.С. Тургенев.