

## Peculiarities of Russian context in O. Wilde's play "Vera"

Olga Posudiyevska

Department of foreign languages for engineering, technical and natural sciences  
Oles' Honchar Dnipropetrovsk National University, Ukraine

Corresponding e-mail: anlang@ukr.net

**Keywords:** Russian topic, mysterious half-real world, "unusual" reality, exotic Russian coloring, widely-used clichés, "naïve" confusion, battle of worldviews

**ABSTRACT.** At the end of the XIX century the interest of British intellectual circles to the Russian Empire was intensified due to the latest events – the appearance of Nihilists on the Russian political arena. British intellectuals, especially those contradicting Victorian social and moral norms, were inspired by the new type of hero-nihilist – a romantic highly-spiritual revolutionary, struggling for freedom, which was created in their imagination mostly due to Turgenev's works and the lawsuit of Vera Zasulich, widely discussed in European press.

This study concentrates on the analysis of the first play by Oscar Wilde *Vera*, dedicated to the Russian topic, which seems at first sight a naïve melodrama with confusion of historical events and features of the Russian social life. The peculiarities of Wilde's perception of Russian reality, as well as literary devices used for creating Russian background, are analyzed. Special attention is paid to the tradition of depicting a mysterious and exotic Russia in English literature since the XVI century, followed by Wilde. The writer uses a number of standard clichés presenting his "Russia" as a far-away country with eternal frost, tyrannical government, poor and savage people, fully obedient to the cruel ruler.

However, as the researcher concludes, Wilde didn't aim at making a narration about real struggle between czarist regime and the Nihilists in Russia. The future leader of the aestheticism turns to Russian environment as an "another" place – a location, being unusual for an Englishmen, where the writer expects to find high feelings and lofty ideals, spiritual aims and moral values which couldn't exist in pragmatic Victorian society. Wilde's "Russia" is presented as an exotic, half-fictional reality, created mostly by the author's imagination as proper surroundings for evolution of the romantic conflict between the tyrannical Czar and the Nihilists. However, this conflict becomes a spiritual battle of cynical and pragmatic worldview with high spiritual and moral ideals, the aesthetic embodiment of the eternal struggle between the good and the evil, soul chastity and sin.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The English-Russian political relations which became strained by the end of the XIX century, nevertheless, couldn't weaken special interest of Great Britain to the political, social and cultural life of the Russian Empire. In English literary circles there was an intense discussion of the works by Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol' (Alexeev 6). The popularity of five brilliant Russian writers – Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov and Gorky – is still boundless on the shores of the Foggy Albion. Moral pathos of Russian literature couldn't but attract a young aesthete due to many reasons – firstly, because of the specific cult of Russian literature at Oxford (especially of the works by Turgenev) during Wilde's studentship. It is known that Wilde highly appreciated the mastery of three Russian writers – Turgenev, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. Russian classical literature is stated to have made a wholesome influence on Wilde's life creed, as it helped him to understand the importance of spiritual values in human life. This influence was especially revealed during the writer's imprisonment and creation of *De profundis* (Sokhriakov 138).

Indeed, Wilde's "strange" choice of czarist Russia as the place of action in his first play *Vera* (1880) is an evidence of doubtless influence of Russian classical writers on the English author's worldview. Unfortunately, the majority of literary critics consider this work as the weakest

play of the great aesthete – a naïve melodrama, awkward in the psychological depiction of characters (Belford 119, Winwar 120). Certainly, the confusion in the events of Russian history (the Nihilists appear at the court of Ivan the Czar in the XVIII century) and superficial knowledge of Russian life provoke laughter of the reader (especially of the Russian one). However, the surcharge of “naïve” confusion makes us feel doubt about the author’s ignorance and realize that it is a literary device. That’s why some scholars finally disclose interesting peculiarities of theme and plot beneath the layer of seeming naïveté – for example, author’s doubtless sympathy for tyrant fighters, which was common for English Romantic writers at the beginning of the XIX century (Obraztsova 213). As it appears, Wilde strives to embody his appeal for freedom in his own way with the help of “unusual” historic material, being exotic for an Englishman, which became, however, only the background for “the drama of passion” with the idea of tyrant fighting (Pavlova 178).

## 2. WILDE’S DEPICTION OF “RUSSIA”: INTERPRETING TRADITION

Without any doubt, the play embodies Wilde’s free treatment of Russian historic and everyday realities with the help of widely-used clichés about horrible snowstorms and bears, who climb into the barns. However, we should take into consideration the tradition of Moscovia description in English literary sources, starting at the end of the XVI century with the work by George Turberville (a secretary of Russian embassy in 1568) where he described in details Russian everyday life (*Tragical Tales, translated by Turberville in time of his troubles, out of sundrie Italians, with the Argument and Lenvoye to eche tale*). We find references to the cold northern country in the works of Elizabethan playwrights. The Siberia was described by Daniel Defoe in the second part of his world-famous novel *Robinson Crusoe*.

According to M. Alexeev, at the end of the XVI - the beginning of the XVII centuries it was natural for the English audience to see at the theatre not only Russian characters, but the whole play with the “Russian” topic (Alexeev 32). However, as the scholar justly points out, the large amount of Russian proper and geographical names were the phantoms of authors’ fantasies (Alexeev 30). All this demonstrates the peculiarity of the Englishmen’s perception of Russia as a mysterious, half-real country which attracted the inhabitants of the Foggy Albion primarily with its exotics. “Typical” Russian exotics was reflected in the work by John Milton *A Brief History of Moscovia and of other less known Countries lying eastward of Russia as far as Cathay* and even in the *Lost Paradise* where the name of Moscow appears together with the names of Cambalik, Byzantium and Turkistan (the same exotic oriental names for an Englishman as “Moscow”). Thus, the name of the Russian capital obtains oriental coloring and the image of far and strange for the Europeans oriental state.

Of all literary works creating a specific legend about Russia, the most popular in Europe became the book by Astolphe de Custine who travelled to Russia in 1839 and noted his impressions about the Russian czarism, based upon lying, fear and spying, which makes people “breathe only on allowance of the Emperor” (Custine 126, 130). No wonder, that in ten years a lot of articles began to appear in English periodicals with quite sympathetic tone towards rapidly growing revolutionary movement in Russia. Herzen’s activity aimed at the Englishmen’s acquaintance with Russian revolutionary-democratic ideas, the lawsuit of Vera Zasulich, being discussed all over Europe, the influence of Turgenev’s novels (especially of *Fathers and sons, New ground*) – all this contributed to the perception of the Russian Nihilists by the British as lonely revolutionaries full of spiritual maximalism and ready for self-sacrifice for the sake of freedom. Wilde being an antagonist of Victorian moral and striving for the idea of struggle for freedom also turned to the new type of the hero-nihilist who had much in common with the image of the French revolutionary of the end of the XVIII century (Pavlova 174).

As it is known, the word “nihilism” originates from the Latin “nihil”, translated as “nothing” and meaning “full negation of everything, total skepticism”. More exactly, it is “negation of generally accepted values: ideals, moral norms, culture and forms of social life”. This phenomenon becomes especially wide-spread during crisis periods of historic and social development (Nihilism).

Namely, in this meaning the concept was perceived by the young aesthete who had made the first acquaintance with it at the pages of Turgenev's novel *Fathers and sons*.

The view of the English author on the czarist regime in Russia at the end of the XIX century is quite interesting for the Russian reader. That view got its reflection, firstly, in the image of Ivan the Czar. The first words of this character are accompanied by the remark "nervous and frightened", and the czar himself is constantly surrounded by the guards (Wilde 383). Impressions about Russian czarism taken from books were completed by the young aesthete's imagination, thus creating the image of a real tyrant who claims that he loves his people ("I love the people"), that he is too merciful ("I'm too merciful myself"), but wishes at the same time that "...this people had but one neck that I might strangle them with one noose!" (Wilde 384, 385). Being constantly under the power of dark suspicions about a possible conspiracy around him the Czar is used to considering tortures and executions the ordinary means for disclosing "conspirators". Emotional state of the sovereign is conveyed by exclamations: "Don't come too near me...", "To kiss my hand? There is some plot in it. He wants to poison me", "What do you startle me like that for?", as well as by the side notes: "watches the courtiers nervously", "in frightened whisper" (Wilde 383, 384, 387). The reader's perception of terror which rises in Ivan's soul to the greatest extent on mentioning the name of Vera – the head of the Nihilists – is intensified due to the literary devices of anaphora and parallelism: "Never to sleep...To trust none but those I have bought...To see a traitor in every smile, poison in every dish, a dagger in every hand! To lie awake at night, listening from hour to hour for the stealthy creeping of the murderer", and also by the repetitions: "You are all spies! you are all spies!" (Wilde 386). The mentioning of concealment of treachery, as well as of poison, dagger and stealthy steps of a possible murderer – all these are well-known devices of "bloody" dramas which intensify the atmosphere of horror. As we see, Wilde turns to the clichés of Elizabethan tragedies for disclosing the image of the Russian czar. The character's speech is filled with traditional images of blood and death, especially when he imagines Vera's execution: "bloody secret", "She shall be flogged by the knout, stifled in the fortress..." (Wilde 386, 389). Very similar to bloody avowals of the characters of Elizabethan plays is the Czar's avowal to destroy all humans: "I shall grind them to powder, and strew their dust upon the air..." (Wilde 390). Ivan's constant fear for life, being the reason of adoption of the martial law, is reflected in the sovereign's words: "I'm not safe anywhere..." (Wilde 385).

It is possible that the image of the real person – Ivan the Terrible – could serve for Wilde as the prototype of a nervous czar always suspecting everybody in conspiracy. The historic Ivan is known to have possessed all the above-mentioned qualities since childhood (Ivan the Terrible). Namely, to this monarch the first work about Russia was dedicated (*The book of the great and powerful Russian czar* by Richard Chancellor, the middle of the XVI century), as well as a great number of printed diaries of the Englishmen visiting Moscovia in the XVI century. Among the latter there were Turberville's epistles where the author marked boundless autocracy and power of a ruler-tyrant, being unusual for an Englishmen. The prototype of Ivan the Czar could also be Paul I who, according to historical sources, had a weak health, was sensitive, short-tempered and suspicious about the surrounding people (Paul I).

Cold Muscovy – unattractive country inhabited by unfriendly people – this is the Russia appearing in Turberville's epistles. The poet describes in details a barren sandy land with forests and wastelands, long, snowy Russian winters and deathly frost which lasts seven months in a year when all plants die in the fields. All these impressions about the outlandish northern country became later specific clichés used by all English writers when they turned to the Russian topics: Shakespeare in *Measure for measure*, Milton in *A Brief History of Moscovia and of other less known Countries lying eastward of Russia as far as Cathay*. Wilde follows this tradition in depiction of his "Russia": "wide waste, Russia", "this icy Russia", "frost and snow", "bleak north", "The snow has fallen heavily since sunset", "It is very cold", "...last winter old Michael was frozen to death in his sleigh in the snowstorm..." (Wilde 366, 403). There are also references in *Vera* to the Russian bear – a strong and furious animal (appearing in Shakespeare's plays *Henry V*, *Macbeth*). In Wilde's play bears are so brave that they easily climb into the barns, that's why the

Russians have to shoot them: “Do you remember how he shot the bear at the barn in the great winter?” (Wilde 365).

An unusual, exotic Russian coloring is enhanced by the play’s anthroponomy. Wilde has chosen widely-spread Russian names for his characters: Peter – for Vera’s father, Dmitri – for her brother, Michael – for the peasant who fell in love with Vera. The choice of names of the main characters – Vera and Alexis – is not occasional. No doubt, Wilde knew about the famous court prosecution of Vera Zasulich. The writer could know from a great number of English sources about the tragic fate of Czar Peter I’s son – Alexis. The idea about the participation of a royal heir in the conspiracy against a weak and nervous king-father could appear in Wilde’s imagination under the influence of the episode from de Custine’s book, describing in details the murder of Paul I in 1801 and pointing out the possibility of involvement of his son Alexander I into the conspiracy.

It should be noted that Wilde knew about the existence of patronymic. Thus, Alexis, the son of Ivan the Czar, joins the Nihilists under the surname Ivanacievitch, the president’s name is Peter Tchernavitch, and the czar’s minister’s name – Prince Petrovitch. In the play one can also encounter Russian surnames, such as Sabouroff – Vera’s surname, Stroganoff – that of Michael, Petouchof – that of the Russian ambassador to Germany. Two surnames – Kotemkin (general of the Czar’s army) and Rouvaloff (Czar’s minister) – are borrowed in a peculiar way from the real historical statesmen – Russian ambassador to Great Britain Shuvaloff and the famous general – Potemkin. In the same manner Wilde’s favourite writer Lev Tolstoy “borrowed” surnames in *War and Peace*: imaginary characters Bolkonski and Drubetski had real prototypes – princes Volkonski and Trubetski.

Wilde’s knowledge of Russian geographical names, as well as of proper ones, becomes obvious when the author mentions a large number of cities of the Russian Empire. Apart from Moscow as the main place of action, references are made to Kiev, Samara, Odessa, Novgorod, Archangel. As we see from the text, Wilde knew about Winter Palace – the main residence of Russian czars which he “placed” in Moscow – and about wonderful golden tapestry covering the walls of palace corridors: ministers’ council is held “in the yellow tapestry room”.

Exotic “Russian” atmosphere is created in the play due to the smallest details and hints. Wilde uses Russian titles of the ruler and the heir apparent: the Czar and the Czarevitch. We can also find references to the monetary units of the Russian Empire: roubles and kopeck. The writer knew even about Russian means of punishment – the knout and the rack. Knout flogging (tyrannical punishment, unusual for an Englishman) is mentioned in the play several times: during the talk between Kotemkin and Vera in the prologue, between Kotemkin and Alexis in the first act, in the Czar’s threats to execute Vera and at last – in Vera’s pleading to take mercy on the Czarevitch who saved all the conspirators “from arrest, torture, flogging, death...” (Wilde 396). Wilde makes this method of punishment a typical Russian reality by introducing into the text an exotic Russian word “knout” without translation.

As it is known, the knout as a means of Russian rulers’ treating their subjects was mentioned in the works by John Webster and Shakespeare wrote about the Russians’ rude corporal force. Wilde, like his predecessors, describes Russia as a country of furious customs where the life of a simple peasant costs nothing: “...the knout is the best school for you to learn politics in” (Wilde 369). The details describing simple people occur quite often in the play. One of the first references appears in Kotemkin’s humorously-ironic speech about the reform of the abolition of serfdom which was accepted, according to the plot of the play, before 1795: “You peasants are getting too saucy since you ceased to be serfs...” (Wilde 369). Another character – Ivan the Czar – speaks about the Russians’ extreme naïveté, simplicity and loyalty to the ruler: “They are good people in the province of Archangel – honest, loyal people. They love me very much – simple, loyal people...” (Wilde 384).

Besides honesty, simplicity and loyalty to the sovereign, Wilde mentions one more feature of Russian mentality – great religiosity: “give them a new saint, it costs nothing” (Wilde 384). The Russians’ extreme striving for religious piousness was noted in Turberville’s epistles, reflecting the author’s surprise at a large number of crosses at the open places and icons in the houses in front of

which the Russians bow to the earth. Thus, the ironic advice of Prince Paul Maraloffski (the head of Ivan's council): "Your Highness would punish them [the citizens of Archangel] more severely by giving them an extra one [saint]" (Wilde 385) seems quite useful from the Englishman's point of view.

Wilde also knew about the large population of the Russian Empire – 30 millions of people, according to the play. That fact irritates the Czar: "There are too many people in Russia, too much money spent on them", "They don't die fast enough..." (Wilde 385, 387). The prejudice about Russian people as poor, rude and illiterate creatures, born under the influence of works by Turberville and other travelers to Russia, is reflected in Prince Paul's words: "...people in Russia...are no better than the animals in one's preserves, and made to be shot at..." (Wilde 383).

However, the English writer suddenly expresses his admiration for "the people of Russia, conquerors of the world" who "from the pine forests of the Baltic to the palms of India...have ridden on victory's mighty wings", which is strongly felt in Alexis' words: "I have seen wave after wave of living men...snatch perilous conquest...when the bloody crescent seemed to shake above our eagles" (Wilde 388). The author could mean the episode of the Russian-Turkish war of 1787-1791 when 1660 Russians under Alexander Suvorov's command gained complete victory over the Turkish army, being 5500 in number.

### 3. CONCLUSION

All peculiarities of creation of images and plot details, used by the young aesthete for embodiment of "Russia", form unique, exotic Russian colouring. Confusion in the chronology of historical events, transposition of the rulers of one epoch into another one – all these facts give evidence that Wilde didn't want to reconstruct the real events of struggle between the Russian czarism and the Nihilists at the end of the XIX century. Russian cultural background, as well as the Italian one in the writer's later play *Duchess of Padua*, becomes "another" environment, an "unusual" reality to which Wilde turns in hope to find fiery and sincere feelings, passionate emotions and soul excitements, non-existent in the Victorian reality. Namely, this half-real, exotic world, not too much based on historic facts, but created mostly by the author's rich imagination, becomes the location of the romantic conflict which fully corresponds to Wilde's aestheticism and world perception. Being depicted as the struggle between the adherents of the czarist regime and the Nihilists, this conflict turns out to be the battle between the bearers of cinic, ironical worldview and people with romantic souls, the guardians of high spiritual emotions and moral ideals. This battle of worldviews, revealed already in Wilde's first work, will be reproduced in future masterpieces of the great aesthete.

### References

- [1] Alexeev M. *Russian-English literary relations (the XVIII – the first half of the XIX centuries)*, in: Literary heritage. Vol. 91, Moscow, 1982 (in Russian).
- [2] Belford, Barbara. *Oscar Wilde: A certain genius*, first ed., New York: Random House, 2000.
- [3] Custine, Astolphe de. *Russia in 1839*, on <http://lib.ru/HISTORY/KUSTIN/rossia1839.txt> (in Russian)
- [4] *Ivan the Terrible* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivan\\_the\\_Terrible/](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivan_the_Terrible/) Web. 02 Dec. 2015.
- [5] *Nihilism* [http://www.vedu.ru/BigEncDic/enc\\_searchresult.asp?S=42435](http://www.vedu.ru/BigEncDic/enc_searchresult.asp?S=42435) (in Russian)
- [6] Obraztsova A. *He plays with everything: mind, philosophy, drama, actors and audience...*, in: Oscar Wilde. Letters, Moscow, 1997, pp. 212-213 (in Russian).
- [7] *Paul I* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul\\_I\\_of\\_Russia/](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_I_of_Russia/) Web. 02 Dec. 2015.
- [8] Pavlova T. "*Vera, or Nihilists*" – "*Russian*" drama by Oscar Wilde: submitted to journal "Russian literature", Moscow, 1986, № 3, pp. 171-181 (in Russian).

- 
- [9] *Russian-Turkish war of 1787-1791*, in: War history of the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 18 century, on [http://wars175x.narod.ru/175\\_rt02.html](http://wars175x.narod.ru/175_rt02.html) (in Russian)
- [10] Sokhriakov Yu. *Oscar Wilde and F. M. Dostoyevsky (ethical search: traditions and influence)*, in: Traditions and innovations in fiction, Gorky teaching institute, 1980, pp. 131-139.
- [11] Wilde, Oscar. *The Collected Works: The Plays, the Poems, the Stories and the Essays including De Profundis*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1997.
- [12] Winwar, Frances. *Oscar Wilde and the yellow "nineties"*, Blue ribbon books, 1942.