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**REFLECTION OF DOSTOEVSKY’S IDEAS IN WILDE’S PLAY  
“VERA, OR THE NIHILISTS”**

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**Abstract**

The article analyzes the typological similarity in the perception of nihilism in F.M. Dostoevsky’s novel «*The Possessed*» and Oscar Wilde’s play «*Vera, or the Nihilists*». Wilde knew the works of outstanding contemporary Russian writers, the topic of conspiracies and popular disorders was relevant to the writer. Wilde was one of the first in English literature to comprehend seriously the activities of revolutionary and terrorist organizations. The article substantiates the similar perception of forming a nihilistic worldview among young people in the last third of the XIX century by Dostoevsky and Wilde. The paper compares ideas of Dostoevsky's novel and Wilde's play about the relationship of conspirators with the authorities, scandalous or criminal methods of their activity, nihilists’ selfish goals hidden behind ideological attitudes. Both authors show nihilism as one of the consequences of weakening piety, strengthening materialistic tendencies. Wilde shared Dostoevsky's idea of the inability to comprehend the laws of the world order only with the help of reason. The article points out some similarities between the image of Shatov and the image of Tsarevich Alexis as victims of nihilism. Each of the authors puts his own meanings into female images, but both have a negative attitude towards socially active heroines. Using the artistic possibilities of the text, the writers emphasize the anti-human essence of nihilism, the similarity of «*The Possessed*» and «*Vera*» is also evident in the fact that each of the authors offers his own utopian idea of the progressive movement of society based on faith.

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## 1. Introduction

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) responded sensitively to the challenges of modernity, and his work brilliantly combines intellectual and aesthetic components. The writer believed that art could not deal with the momentary, and among the current topics, he focused on those that revealed timeless patterns: «The public imagine that, because they are interested in their immediate surroundings, Art should be interested in them also, and should take them as her subject-matter. But the mere fact that they are interested in these things makes them unsuitable subjects for Art» (Collected Works of Oscar Wilde ..., 1997, p. 927). Nihilism became the leading theme in the play «Vera, or the Nihilists» (1880), where Wilde was one of the first in English literature to comprehend the activities of revolutionary and terrorist organizations seriously. Ushakova (2016) in her article «A Russian nihilist as a hero of English literature of the 19th-21st centuries» provides a thorough analysis of a number of texts that represent the image of the Russian nihilist. The paper convincingly proves that this image is often based on the interpretation of the central character of I. S. Turgenev's novel «Fathers and Sons». Turgenev caught the essence of a phenomenon that originated in his era, but the echoes of which are still heard today.

Not only under the influence of Turgenev, but also in the wake of the terrorist attacks that swept across Europe, since the late 1870s, there appeared a number of works of art the heroes of which are primarily Russian «nihilists». For example, Pavlova (1986) lists French novels «The Nihilist Ivan», «The Russian Maidens», V. Sardou's play «Fedora», inspired by the case of Vera Zasulich, and the Italian play «Vera Zasulich» by A. Generale. These works belonged, rather, to the «tabloid» literature; their authors placed more emphasis on the external entertainment of the plots to the detriment of the deep understanding of the phenomenon.

Wilde's acquaintance with I. S. Turgenev's works, as well as his personal meeting with the famous writer, which, according to Ross (1913), took place at Rossetti's in 1879, were a natural step towards the creation of «Vera».

The reason for turning to the topic of nihilism was both the fact that a large community of Russian anarchist emigrants lived in London (Wilson, 2015), and the sensational case of Vera Zasulich. But, in our opinion, it was a valuable opportunity for the writer to deepen a new and large-scale topic discussed by great modern writers. He views the patterns of formation and development of Russian nihilism and the national liberation movement of Ireland, one of the leaders of which was Wilde's mother, as similar not only to each other, but also to other revolutionary-oriented European groups. Geographical and temporal conventions are also not accidental in the play.

## 2. Problem Statement

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Abramovich (1909) drew attention to the fact that in Wilde's work created in the post-prison period, understanding of sufferings approaches F.M. Dostoevsky's interpretation of this theme. In our opinion, already in his first play Wilde approaches Dostoevsky in understanding the essence of nihilism. If the work of Turgenev influenced the choice of the topic, prompted reflection, then in general, the reasoning about the prospects for the rebirth of nihilism into terrorism are much closer to the ideas developed by F. M. Dostoevsky in the novel «The Possessed» (1871).

It is found out that Wilde knew the novels «Humiliated and Insulted» (there is a well-known review «"Humiliated and insulted" by Dostoevsky» (1887)), «Crime and Punishment», «Notes from the dead house» and, probably, «The Brothers Karamazovs» (Ipatova, 2003). Wilde, who was always interested in literary novelties, could have known about the content of Dostoevsky's «The Possessed»: Ipatova (2013), who studied the journal «The Athenaeum», believes that the earliest publication can be considered a lifetime obituary of Dostoevsky (1875) by W. Ralston, containing a critical analysis of the main works of the Russian writer, including «The Possessed». Wilde could also have known about Dostoevsky and his work from O. A. Novikova, “a well-known publicist and hostess of a high-society salon in London, a correspondent of Dostoevsky” (as cited in Ipatova, 2003, p. 271). Although we have no data on Wilde's acquaintance with the novel «The Possessed», it is very interesting to see the typological similarity in the view of both writers on nihilism.

### **3. Research Questions**

The article substantiates the similarity in the perception of the problem of forming a nihilistic worldview among young people in the last third of the XIX century by Wilde and Dostoevsky; compares a number of ideas of Dostoevsky's novel «The Possessed» and O. Wilde's play «Vera, or the Nihilists»; reveals similarities in depicting by both authors the relationship between the conspirators and the authorities, the nihilists' pursuit of selfish goals hidden behind ideological attitudes, the interpretation of female images; interprets the figure of an innocent victim present in both texts.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The aim of the work is to identify typological similarities in the presentation of the topic of nihilism by such different authors.

### **5. Research Methods**

The research uses biographical, cultural-historical, historical-typological, comparative-historical, and hermeneutic methods.

### **6. Findings**

The parallels in the perception of nihilism in Dostoevsky's novel and Wilde's play are natural: they interpreted the same or similar events.

Tikhomirov (2019) in the article «Sergey Nechaev's "A Revolutionary's Catechism". A Historical Document and Its Role in the Creative History of "The Possessed" states that Dostoevsky “certainly knew this program document, analyzed it deeply and, while continuing to work on the novel (creating parts two and three, where, unlike part one, the diverse activities of Pyotr Stepanovich come to the fore), recalled and borrowed much of it”. (p. 174)

It is well known that the image of Pyotr Verkhovensky in the drafts of the writer appeared under the name Nechaev (Gogina, 2015), and Verkhovensky acts as prescribed by Nechaev's «Catechism». The same document («Catechism of the Revolutionary» by S. Nechaev) was also used as a source by Wilde (Ellman, 2000).

The Nihilist oath from Wilde's play, borrowed from the «Catechism», expressively emphasizes not only the rejection of kindness, mercy, compassion, love, but also extreme straightforwardness, commitment to thoughtless adherence to the canon.

The play obviously presents the conventionality, theatricality, and affectation of nihilists' meetings. Cloaks, masks, rather cumbersome greetings, oaths, and formulaic phrases are designed to emphasize the formalism of the external side and to focus on the essence of nihilism as a phenomenon.

The conspirators in Wilde's play are heterogeneous in their composition. Among them there are peasants (Vera, Michael), students (Dimitri Sabouroff), intellectuals (Professor). Later it turns out that in this environment there can be everyone who shares the idea of revenge at least in words (Prince Paul Maraloffski), and one of the most convinced nihilists is Tsarevich Alexis. Nihilists do not unite on social grounds, or even because of a desire for revenge, as they claim («We also meet daily for revenge» (Collected Works of Oscar Wilde ..., 1997, p. 392). We see that the members of this organization, with the exception of Vera and Alexis, are united by selfish interests. Thus, Mikhail, who is in love with Vera, wants to get rid of a happy rival, Alexis, repeatedly declaring him a traitor. When Vera tries to justify him, the conspirators are ready to renounce her. Mikhail and his associates see the weak point of the heroine in her feelings to her brother and the wounded love to Alexis, forcing her to recognize the young tsar as unreliable. Personal hostility often drives the hero of «The Possessed». Here is an example from the dialogue between Kirillov and Pyotr Verkhovensky about the murder of Shatov:

– <...> You've done that for he spat in your face in Geneva!

– For that and another thing (Dostoevsky, 1982, p. 151).

In the monograph «"The Possessed": a novel-warning», Saraskina (1996) wrote that Dostoevsky's «The Possessed» (political adventurers) copies the forms and methods of the state machine. "Being the flesh of the system, in their opposition to the old state, they only change the signs, and then not all, but some. Minus the pseudo-revolutionary phraseology, the only serious claim remains the struggle for power, the desire to replace those in power" (p. 275). Wilde's play also shows the symmetrical relationship between the authorities and the nihilists. The brutality of the government breeds the retaliatory brutality of the conspirators, which forces the authorities to strengthen their positions by force. The writer evaluates the activities of the conspirators and the official leadership equally negatively, since they are united by inhumane egoistic principles.

In the novel «The Possessed», as Smirnov (2010) notes, "Dostoevsky shows that in order to achieve their goals, "The Possessed" go to murder, arson, organizing scandals, blasphemy, etc.», which corresponded to the provisions of the «Catechism». Provocation as a way to achieve the goal by Bakunists-Nechayevists was used quite often" (p. 34).

Saraskina (1996), who analyzed reviews of the Nechaev's case, noted frightening trends:

«< ... > the simple truth that the goal achieved by bad methods is not a good goal was inaccessible to the consciousness of even those who were confused and alarmed by the methods: even if Nechaev and his associates acted dishonorably and viciously, but they were striving for a great and beautiful goal. (p. 330)

These words also characterize the Wilde's conspirators, although the writer pointed out that the «great and beautiful goal» for them is to cover up selfish interests.

In Wilde's play, nihilism is also shown as one of the consequences of weakening piety, strengthening materialistic tendencies. Vera is sensitive to religion. It is worth remembering that her initial negative opinion of the nihilists was formed precisely because of the authority of the priest:

PETER: I reckon they're some of those Nihilists the priest warns us against. Don't stand there idle, my girl.

VERA: I suppose, then, they are all wicked men (Collected Works of Oscar Wilde ..., 1997, p. 367)

Anarchist theorist P. Kropotkin and S. Stepnyak-Kravchinsky, a Russian figure in the revolutionary movement, claimed that the formation of the revolutionary movement and nihilism were inextricably linked with the crisis of religious consciousness. Their opinion is interesting to us because Wilde was personally acquainted with both of them, although this acquaintance occurred after «Vera» was written. Stepnyak-Kravchinsky (1972) stated that the preaching of materialism met with no serious resistance in those years and that materialism “became a kind of dominant religion of the educated class...” (p. 384).

Yanov (2007) believes that the novel «The Possessed» in the image of Stavrogin reflected Dostoevsky's deeply hated phenomenon: intelligence without faith. «He betrays everything that it is possible to betray in this world, confuses everyone, confuses himself— and, like Judas, hangs himself” (p. 53). In the image of Stavrogin, the writer “tried to embody his general idea, which permeates all his publicist writings, the idea that the intellect is incapable of unraveling the laws of social organization, which are accessible only to the intuition of the believer, and that the intellect is the Mephistopheles of social consciousness, provoking it to impossible, insane actions and inevitably drawing it into the historical dead end of unbelief, crime, and demonism” (as cited in Yanov, 2007, p. 54).

And this is exactly the thought that is read out in Wilde's play and which will pass through all his work. In a letter to W. Ward in July 1876, Wilde (1979) wrote: “Faith is, I think, a bright lantern for the feet, though of course an exotic plant in man's mind, and requiring continual cultivation” (p. 8). Even this letter, sent by a twenty-one-year-old author, gives us the right to say that questions of faith are very significant for him. Wilde's subsequent works prove this. Let us refer to the article by Koroleva (2020) «Soul-Anguish-Perfection: Oscar Wilde's Dialogue with Kropotkin and Dostoevsky», where the Christian positions of Wilde are rationalized, bringing his worldview closer to the views of F. M. Dostoevsky.

In this context, the title of the Wilde tragedy is also revealed, reflecting the internal conflict of the play, which is associated with the problem of choosing faith, trust, love (the main heroine) or terror, schematism in thoughts and actions, material values (nihilists). The reference to the Latin roots of the words vera and nihilist emphasizes that it is not only about the specific characters of the play: we have the author's

reflections on the ways of the development of modern society, the choice of the generation (Valova & Shcherbakova, 2015).

Back to the story. Under the leadership of S. Nechaev, a follower of the anarchist theorist and ideologist of revolutionary populism M. Bakunin, a secret society «People's Reprisal» was created in Moscow, the emblem of which was an axe. In 1869, this revolutionary terrorist organization was disclosed: Nechayevists strangled and finished off a student Ivan Ivanov with a shot at point-blank range. Ivanov was Nechaev's constant opponent and was eliminated due to the group's concerns about the possibility of their disclosing. Nechaev managed to escape abroad, but all the other murderers were brought to trial in 1871 (Naumov, 2006). Even many domestic radicals, for example, V. I. Zasluch, G. A. Lopatin, N. K. Mikhailovsky, condemned Nechaev for the fallacy and uselessness of «Nechaevism» in the revolutionary cause (as cited in Smirnov, 2010).

Student Ivanov becomes the prototype of the image of Shatov in the novel «The Possessed». In the final version, Shatov is presented «as a bearer of high Christian ideals, immeasurably superior to the nihilists both in ideological and moral terms. It is in the person of Shatov that Christianity is shown by Dostoevsky as the only correct and unquestionable alternative to nihilism on the stage of devilry» (as cited in Gogina, 2015, p. 151). We have no information about Wilde's acquaintance with Ivan Ivanov's case of, but in «Vera» there is a character who is both an ally and an opponent of the nihilists. This is the son of Tsar Ivan, Alexis Ivanacievitch.

Tsarevich Alexis appears among the conspirators as a medical student (remember another medical student, Turgenev's Bazarov), sincerely believing in the good cause to which the nihilists are devoted. Alexis is meek and merciful in a Christian way. He partly resembles Shatov, who is seized with passionate and sacrificial love, who sees the great and inexplicable mystery of appearing a new being where the midwife sees «just a further development of the organism» (as cited in Dostoevsky, 1982, p. 132). Dostoevsky's ideal, says Gogina (2015), is partially embodied in the image of Shatov, «who gives himself (or potentially is ready to give) to humanity in the person of those people for whom he feels sincere love» (as cited in Gogina, 2015, p. 152).

In Wilde's play, only Vera considers the ascension to the throne of the humane and kind Alexis Ivanacievich a blessing. The rest of the conspirators slander the heroine's attitude and force her to kill the young tsar. The final scene, where Vera struggles with her duty and passion, is symbolic. She is unable to kill her beloved and plunges the dagger into herself with the words «I have saved Russia!» (Collected Works of Oscar Wilde ..., 1997, p. 406). To save Russia (which in Wilde's interpretation is equivalent to saving Europe), it is necessary to destroy nihilism with its materialism, destruction and lack of faith.

The interpretation of female images by Wilde and Dostoevsky is largely different. In each of Wilde's tragedies, the murderer is a woman (Vera, Beatrice, Salome). In the writer's art world, a woman is not a positive character, which is obvious from his categorical attitudes. For example, a woman has the power of influence that causes a man to stray from his path of individualism. The type of a murder committed (bloody or bloodless) also plays an important role in understanding Wilde's position. Vera stabs herself with a dagger, Beatrice drinks poison, Salome is crushed by shields. Since blood and soul are one in Wilde's works, a wounded heart allows the soul to return to its lost original purity, which is not given to bloodlessly killed

heroes. This individual author's view distinguishes the image of Vera from a number of heroines of other tragedies of the writer.

With Dostoevsky, as Straus (1994) believes, maternal metaphors are associated with the idea of the feminine components of faith, with the earth and Russia as the mother, with Jesus as the mother's son, including the traits of suffering, self-sacrifice and compassionate love often associated with femininity. The novelist warns that the masculine aggressiveness associated with radical politics and violent transformations of tradition may destroy what is best about woman's difference. Here, therefore, we see the opposite interpretation of women's images, the interpretation of the role of women in modern society.

At the same time, there are parallels in the representation of female images by Wilde and Dostoevsky. Thus, Dostoevsky caricatured, for example, Virginsky's sister, who stands for women's emancipation. In this way, the writer confirms the fallacy and delusions of women-socialists of a revolutionary orientation, without distinguishing them from a number of equally deluded and fanatical men.

Wilde negatively portrayed images of women fighting for their rights. The writer was acquainted with many activists of the suffragist movement, for example, with writer Maria Sickert. Wilde's wife also spoke at Women's Committee meetings, took part in Lady Sandhurst's election campaign, and the Women's Liberal Foundation. When Wilde edited the magazine «The World of Women», he published articles about famous ladies who wrote about feminism, about the movement for voting rights. In the comedy «The Ideal Husband» (1895), Gertrude Chiltern is a member of a Liberal Women's Association, which, as it seems to her, is engaged in boring, useful and delightful things («Oh! dull, useful, delightful things...») (Collected Works of Oscar Wilde ..., 1997, p. 620), such as factory legislation, the eight-hour working day, women's voting rights. In general, the social activities of the ladies are presented by the writer with undisguised irony.

## 7. Conclusion

Both Dostoevsky and Wilde turn to the topic of nihilism as the most relevant topic of their era. Russian historian and philosopher P. Novgorodtsev, reflecting on the choice of the Russian intelligentsia, noted that «a different path is possible and necessary to it, to which it has long been called by its greatest representatives, such as Chaadaev, Dostoevsky, Vlad. Solovyov. If instead it elected Bakunin and Chernyshevsky, Lavrov and Mikhailovsky as its leaders, it is a great misfortune for the intelligentsia itself and for our motherland. This is the way of falling away, of breaking away from the positive principles of life» (Novgorodtsev, 1995, 348). Using the artistic possibilities of the text, both writers emphasize the inhumane essence of this phenomenon. Both writers associate nihilism with disbelief, rationality, selfishness, and – more broadly – with the destruction of love and life. This is evidenced by the murder of Shatov («The Possessed»), and the destruction of the future of Vera and Alexis («Vera, or the Nihilists»).

Ipatova (2003) points out the peculiarity of Wilde's perception of «Crime and Punishment», which was manifested in an anonymous review of Wilde: “As an artist, he [Wilde] involuntarily selects for analysis ideological and semantic complexes of the novel that are close to him, in the development of which, however, in his articles he felt involved not so much in Dostoevsky as in his own spiritual experiences” (p. 256). Wilde's works as a whole shows that both in philosophy and in the art of his predecessors and contemporaries, the writer chose what was close to his worldview. Perhaps the comparison of «Vera» and

«The Possessed» will allow us to take a step in revealing the question of Wilde's acquaintance with this text by F. Dostoevsky. Wilde describes the nihilist as a «strange sufferer» whose portrait was begun by Turgenev and completed by Dostoevsky. «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 the treatise «The Decay of Lying» (1889) (Collected Works of Oscar Wilde ..., 1997, p. 934). Here the writer does not point to a specific novel, but makes it clear that he is aware of the theme of nihilism presented by Russian writers. Abramovich (1909), who was one of the first to point out the commonality of the theme of suffering in the works of Wilde and Dostoevsky, in «The Religion of Beauty and Suffering» traces the path of Wilde, from which «the author of "Salome" came to the path of the "The brothers Karamazovs"». Abramovich does not mention «Vera» in his text, although it is now obvious that Wilde's path to Dostoevsky began with his first play.

The history of Russia of the twentieth century convinced us that art is not capable of preventing misfortune, and Dostoevsky's novel-warning did not help to avoid revolutionary catastrophes. Akroyd (2017) devoted her article «A warning in the shape of the novel, the relevance of lessons contained in F. Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed* for twenty-first-century United States» to the study of the patterns of the origin of urban unrest and violence, noted by Dostoevsky in «The Possessed» and relevant to modern American society. The researcher shows that there are features that are repeated by contemporaries, but the novel also helps to reveal new sides in both life processes and the novel. Researchers note the utopianism of Dostoevsky's Christian ideas. Yanov (2007), comparing him with M. Bakunin, writes that “under his pen, the modern conflict grows into a historical, universal, biblical conflict” (p. 59). Naturally, he starts the real history of the conflict in ancient times. Dostoevsky offers Christian socialism, the popular faith. Wilde in his play «Vera, or the Nihilists» also partly presents her utopia, contrasting the pragmatism of modernity with faith and love.

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