



Vera or the Nihilists

Oscar Wilde

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A melodramatic tragedy set in Russia, *Vera, or the Nihilists* is loosely based on the story of Vera Zasulich. It was the first play that Wilde wrote. It features Russian revolutionaries who seek to assassinate a reform-minded Emperor. Though Wilde's fictional Emperor differs from the actual Alexander, contemporary events in Russia – as published in the British press of the time – clearly influenced Wilde.

Vera or the Nihilists Details

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Debout, les damnés de la terre

Debout, les forçats de la faim

La raison tonne en son cratère

C'est l'éruption de la fin

Du passé faisons table rase

Foules, esclaves, debout, debout

Le monde va changer de base

Nous ne sommes rien, soyons tout

/: C'est la lutte finale

Groupons-nous, et demain

L'Internationale

Sera le genre humain :/

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Karim Bazan says

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leynes says

Oscar Wilde and Russia. Two things I really love... but throw them together and you get something that resembles neither, and thus, in the end, fell flat for me. I love my little trash child, but I especially adore his pettiness when it comes to his society plays. The way he makes fun of the London high society is just golden.

Vera, or The Nihilists (1880), however, is quite the different play. It is a melodramatic tragedy set in Russia and is loosely based on the life of Vera Zasulich, who was a 19th century Russian Menshevik writer and revolutionary. Even though this political melodrama lacks a lot of wit (or in general a good plot), I really appreciate it, because it was Oscar's first play, and as his mom, I am bound to be proud. :) The play was not a success (what a surprise) and folded after only one week (my poor baby boy, just you wait, your time will come). Alfred Bryan, a Canadian lyricist, actually made fun of Oscar, drawing a cartoon of him with the description: "Never mind, Oscar; other great men have had their dramatic failures!" Oh my.

At the time of writing, the reform-minded Tsar Alexander II was involved in a struggle with revolutionaries who sought to assassinate him (and eventually succeeded). Though none of Wilde's characters correspond to actual Russian people of the time, the above situation was well-known both to Wilde and to the audience for which he was writing. In 1878, three years before the play's completion, Vera Zasulich shot the St Petersburg Chief of Police, Trepov.

The play starts out in a tavern, which is situated along a road to the prison camps in Siberia. Vera is working there as a barmaid, when a gang of prisoners stop at the tavern. She immediately recognises her brother as one of the prisoners. In order to avenge him, she sets out for Moscow to join the Nihilists, a terrorist group trying to assassinate the Czar.

Years later, Vera has become the Nihilists' top assassin. During her work with them she fell in love with fellow Nihilist Alexis. When a Nihilist meeting is nearly broken up by soldiers, Alexis thwarts them by revealing his true identity: he is the Czarevich, heir to the Russian throne. Where this earns him more admiration from Vera, the other Nihilists hate him even more because they condemn the Czar and his offspring.

After the Nihilists manage to assassinate the Czar, Alexis ascends the throne and exiles Prince Paul Maraloffski. The latter then joins the Nihilists and convinces them that Alexis is a traitor, and so they set out to kill him. This task is given to Vera, so that she can prove where her loyalties lie. She is supposed to stab Alexis, and throw the dagger out of the window as a signal to Nihilist agents below. If she does not, the agents will break in and kill Alexis. Remembering her poor brother's fate, Vera grows cold, and agrees to stab the man he loves.

Alexis, unaware of the schemings, is actually trying to be a good ruler. After his coronation he intends to end injustice in Russia, and give back to the poor, and restore the prisoners to their rightful home. When Vera enters the palace, she can't bring herself to kill him, and after a good heart-to-heart, Alexis proposes to her. As she accepts him, she hears the agents outside getting restless because of the missing signal. In order to save Alexis and the improvements his reign will bring, she stabs herself (which is fucking stupid, but we'll talk about that later) and throws the dagger out the window. The agents depart satisfied. When Alexis asks her shocked what she has done, she replies: I have saved Russia (which sounds fucking epic now, but is, in fact, just really, really stupid).

So, let's talk about this clusterfuck, also known as the plot of this play. First of all, I am not even sure what kind of message Oscar was trying to send with this? Was he trying to undermine his Socialist standing, did he take the view that one is never too young to die for one's country? Like... I need an explanation, because this whole terrorist group thang made no lick of sense. So, let's talk about the ending, which solved absolutely nothing. Sorry to break it to you, Vera, but you did not save Russia. You stabbed yourself for nothing... because guess what will happen the next morning? The Nihilists will see that Alexis is still alive, then they will assume that Alexis stabbed you (you aka Vera), and so this will be another reason for them to motherfucking assassinate Alexis. A mission which they will easily accomplish because Alexis refuses to have guards with him, and then Russia will go to shit again. Round of fucking applause for your stupidity, Vera. Here's what you should have done: TALK to the motherfucking agents and TELL them that Alexis is a good dude, and that he intends to end the unjust treatment of the poor Russian population, and then give Alexis an ultimatum, so that he can prove that he means business... And everyone can live happily ever after. Saved Russia, my ass.

So overall this play just lacked sense and wit, even though we can see the forerunner of the *Dandy* in the character of Prince Paul, who was actually a complete shithead, but due to his cynical and snarky comments, one of my favorite characters:

Czar: I won't open it. There may be something in it.

Prince Paul: It would be a very disappointing letter, Sire, if there wasn't.

OR

Count Rouvaloff: I was giving his Royal Highness some good advice, your Majesty.

Prince Paul: Count Rouvaloff is the typical spendthrift, Sire; he is always giving away what he needs most.

Oh my, if this doesn't scream ALGERNON to you, I don't know what does. ;)

Also, I'm not trying to be petty or anything, but instead of calling himself the Lord of Language, Oscar should have called himself the Lord of I-used-that-line-before, because now that I have read all of his plays, it is mind-boggling to me how often he re-used his good lines. So in *Vera* Prince Paul says: "Experience, the name men give to their mistakes.", and then, some years later, in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Mr Dumby says: "Experience is the name every one gives to their mistakes." - I see what you did there, Oscar, and it's cheap. Real cheap, my son. (He did the same thing with the famous phrase: "All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does, and that is his." which he used in *Earnest* and in *A Woman of No Importance*)

I know I'm being really hard on my son right now, but criticizing my faves is a hobby of mine. It's a sport. Keeps the mind sharp. ;) Overall, I think it was really insightful and about time that I finally read Oscar's first play. It is amazing to reconstruct his literary journey and see how he progressed as a writer over the years. Chapeau to my little trash child, you did well in the end. <3

Bettie? says

"Brother Willie- "Never mind, Oscar; other great men have had their dramatic failures!" 1883 cartoon by Alfred Bryan after the failure of Oscar Wilde's play *Vera*; or, *The Nihilists* in America

Opening: Scene.—A Russian Inn. Large door opening on snowy landscape at back of stage. Peter Sabouroff and Michael.

Peter (warming his hands at a stove). Has Vera not come back yet, Michael?

Mich. No, Father Peter, not yet; 'tis a good three miles to the post office, and she has to milk the cows besides, and that dun one is a rare plaguey creature for a wench to handle.

Peter. Why didn't you go with her, you young fool? she'll never love you unless you are always at her heels; women like to be bothered.

Mich. She says I bother her too much already, Father Peter, and I fear she'll never love me after all.

Peter. Tut, tut, boy, why shouldn't she? you're young and wouldn't be ill-favoured either, had God or thy mother given thee another face. Aren't you one of Prince Maraloffski's gamekeepers; and haven't you got a good grass farm, and the best cow in the village? What more does a girl want?

Mich. But Vera, Father Peter—

Peter. Vera, my lad, has got too many ideas; I don't think much of ideas myself; I've got on well enough in life without 'em; why shouldn't my children? There's Dmitri! could have stayed here and kept the inn; many a young lad would have jumped at the offer in these hard times; but he, scatter-brained featherhead of a boy, must needs go off to Moscow to study the law! What does he want knowing about the law! let a man do his duty, say I, and no one will trouble him.

Paris Review: “In many ways, fears of Russian interference unfolded in Victorian Britain in a manner not unlike what we see today”

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Historical context: In 1878, three years before the play's completion, Vera Zasulich shot the St Petersburg Chief of Police, Trepov. Wilde described himself as a Socialist, although Ellmann describes his Socialism as more "a general hatred of tyranny" than a specific political belief.

Vanessa J. says

3.5 out of 5 stars

Who knew Oscar Wilde would write a tragedy? This one involves war, conspiracies and loss. The plot is set in 18th century Russia, and it revolves around a group - the Nihilists - trying to assassinate the Czar. It had some comments that I couldn't help but think they were meant to deliver a *message*. But of course, it's not a work by Oscar Wilde if it doesn't have witty comments. So yes, this is a tragedy that gets satirical at points. Truly recommended.

Shriya says

It's a tragedy that one of the best Wildean Tragedy, '*Vera, or the Nihilists*', isn't a well known play at all! We go about praising other plays by him and know that he can write comedies like '*The Importance of Being Earnest*' and social satires like '*A Woman of No Importance*' but Wilde is the last person a reader can associate with tragedies, which is a shame indeed because '*Vera, or the Nihilists*' happens to be one of the finest tragedies that I have ever come across. In fact, in my opinion, it is even better than **Bernard Shaw's** '*Saint Joan*' because unlike Joan, Vera's sense of patriotism is not exactly guided by the Divine Word. It is much more practical and has a clear motive.

The only place where I'd dock off stars from this play is that it is not entirely faithful to history and historical facts. In fact, I recommend you do some digging on Czar Alexander II first. Or maybe after because it really spoils the play's romance!

Alex says

A Fun Little Melodrama, Comedy, and Revolution

Set in 19th Century Russia, there is a smell of revolution in the air. The Nihilists plot to assassinate the Czar, with top assassin Vera feared above all by the Empire. But who can they trust? Where do loyalties lie? Who are the spies and double agents lurking amongst the palace and the Nihilists?

There are some nice little twists in the plot with echoes of Romeo and Juliet and Macbeth. I would classify the play as a "*tragicomedy*". The plot is quite simple and easily developed.

The melodrama and tragedy are well balanced by Wilde's classic cynical humour, with plenty of witty epigrams:

"Life is much too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it."

"Indifference is the revenge the world takes on mediocrities."

"I would sooner lose my best friend than my worst enemy. To have friends, you know, one need only be good-natured; but when a man has no enemy left there must be something mean about him."

It is this wealth of witty epigrams, which really sets Wilde apart as an excellent and extremely intelligent writer. Indeed, the success of his later plays such as, *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* are founded upon Wilde's comic genius.

However, the ending is perhaps predictable, and the play lacks the ultimate wow-factor present in most of Wilde's works. Still, it was a pleasure to read. This was Wilde's first play, and it unfortunately flopped upon its first releases.

This is well worth a read to get a taste of Wilde's earlier works. I like this mix of a little humour, a little melodrama, and a little revolution. I give this play **3.5/5 stars**, rounding up because I'm feeling generous today!

Ana says

Though this plot makes little sense, I liked the cynical humour and plenty of witty epigrams. If there were a little less melodrama I would have liked Oscar Wilde's first play more.

Amr Mohamed says

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Mariam Abood says

I was really pleasantly surprised by this play. Due to the themes of a girl trying to save Russia from a totalitarian government, you might be forgiven for mistaking this book as a dystopian. But it is actually inspired by events from the past.

I thought this play was actually incredibly ahead of its time considering this play involves a strong female protagonist that all the other male protagonists seem to fear. But to be honest I didn't really expect anything less of the brilliant Mr Wilde.

I would even go as far as to call this my favourite Oscar Wilde play, it's just a damn shame that no one ever seems to appreciate it. I want a film adaptation! Other than that a great read

Sandi says

Wilde, I'm glad you made the switch to comedy, because this tragedy is not one of your best works. It's readable, but the ending is agonizingly inevitable, and for being an assassin at the center of the action, Vera's character is flat and predictable. Some of Wilde's irony and wit lurks around corners here and there, but it's mostly from Prince Paul and the minor characters of the royal party, making those characters that we are meant to revile, the most entertaining to watch.

Salam Almahi says

The revolution
The brain-washing
The slyness and conspiracy
The romance
The feminism
The sacrifice
The oath
The blood
The humanity

It was a new light to see Wilde under, yet he excelled. A pleasant surprise. The ending a genius.

The play was very well-structured. Each act delivered exactly what it was supposed to, and all of them put together flowed beautifully. You did it again, Oscar!

abdou aly says

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Jim Dooley says

My assumption is that this was written because the writer believed passionately in the central point of the dangers of ideologies causing people to lose their humanity. It is demonstrated in the Czar who is paralyzed by advisors who convince him of plotting by literally everyone to political groups who deny evidence because it goes against what they want to believe.

The really curious aspect about this is that it was written by Oscar Wilde, and it is devoid of the wit and creativity usually found in his work. It isn't bad, but it would be a tedious night at the theater filled with chest-beating and long-winded pronouncements. The interesting emotional element of two people who are

kept from love by their positions in society and culture is reduced to a sub-plot.

This is not to say that the central message is not worth addressing. The presentation, though is similar to many social justice pieces that are formatted like an extended lecture. There are moments, early in the work, when there are brief brushes of comedic social commentary. These are soon swept under the carpet and replaced with more strident speeches.

For me, this was worth reading as an Oscar Wilde curio. Prime Wilde it isn't.

Dunya Buzidi says

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