



Reading Wilde's Vera as an Expression of the Dramatist's Evolution



Ravi Mishra ^a

Article history:

Received: 3 February 2017
Revised: 20 June 2017
Approved: 8 July 2017
Published: 16 July 2017

Keywords:

Self;
Vera;
Wilde;
Theater;
Tragedies;
Melodrama;

Abstract

Wilde's early plays are tragic and political in nature. He writes in his early career as an evolving dramatist as with a sense of missionary and experimental zeal. Vera's importance in the Wildean canon is that it traces the early elements of the formative mould in which Wilde later wrote his satires and brilliant comedies. The critical essence of the play is its serious, tragic and political tone that Wilde converts to farce in his later career. These are the points that this paper touches upon to conclude that the early Wilde canon is a reflection both of the later Wildean farce and the very early Wildean erudition.

2455-8028 ©Copyright 2017. The Author.
This is an open-access article under the CC BY-SA license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)
All rights reserved.

Author correspondence:

Ravi Mishra,
Assistant Professor, Modern girls Degree College, Lucknow, UP. India
Email address: ravidnmishra@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Wilde had completed his training as an aesthete at Oxford and had gone on to the high Victorian dinner table as a dandy. Yet to Robbie Ross he had declared: 'There is, there is an instinct in me to fashion the fashions through storms' (Ellmann 188). He had read Ruskin and Pater too closely not to know that all fashions are shaped up by and around the stormy emotions of humanity. Before he had picked up any of his philosophies his mother had told him that she was so proudly Irish and that she represented the soul of Ireland. A profound disenchantment with establishment, therefore, was natural to have found a home in Wilde's way of looking at things, and Vera is the playwright's first indirect shot at revolutionizing society. To disorientate Wilde and locate him in the subtext of politics and tragedy is akin to reading him out of sync with the very spirit of his work. Yet, Vera is one great effort that Wilde made precisely to establish himself, as a playwright, in a very different genre. 'Vera; or, The Nihilists' – as its full title reads - is a melodramatic tragedy set in Russia and loosely based on the life of Vera Zasulich. It was Wilde's first play to be performed. In 1880, with only a few copies privately printed, arrangements were made with noted actresses for a production in England but this never materialized. The first ever public performance was in New York in 1883 at the Union Square Theatre based on revisions made by Wilde while lecturing in America in 1882.

^a Assistant Professor, Modern girls Degree College, Lucknow, UP. India

2. Research Methods

A close reading of the text in the context of Wilde's early readings and life and the analysis of the earlier criticisms of Vera and Wilde's early drama.

3. Results and Analysis

From his Oxford days Wilde had learned to hold his Irishness deep within him – as his '*mathair*' – as the instinct that opposed the metropolis from the periphery – and it is that precisely that he drags into his plot in his maiden play (Dowling 38). It is also in Vera that Wilde's Irishness is so directly brought out in terms of sentiments that do not harbor his caricatures of the English 'genteel' class and his aestheticism but his appreciation of the sentiments of Liberty and Freedom. Vera is no doubt a powerful play; one that talks of liberation and the rights of the people above that of the royalists and those that claim to be ruling in the name of religion. This fact was what was behind the play not being staged in London. And more than anyone else, Wilde knew that his treatment of the theme of passion and love conflicted by the claims of liberty and love on an individual might cause people to think about their lives – something the authorities would have done anything to avoid. It is this aspect of Wilde's 'self' that Vera reveals.

As aforesaid, Wilde's mother had been a patriot; a very popular one at that; her revolutionism and radical Irish sentiments were more than forthcoming with her son as he absorbed one of the sensational episodes of the times, reported widely in the papers of the day in 1978: the assassination attempt by a Russian woman, Vera Zassoulich, who shot General Fyodor Fyodorovich Trepov. The woman in question was the daughter of an officer in the Line and had been a revolutionary since the age of seventeen; the General in question had angered her by imprisoning her lover, a Nihilist, and 'ordering that one of their woman friends' who was in prison be flogged' (Cohen 45).

This case had woken up the whole of Europe to take notice of what was happening in Russia; Ellmann writes that 'the Pall Mall Gazette of 14 December 1889 said that 'her pistol shot rang like a bugle across Europe'' (46). It was in this affair that Wilde located the source for his larger than life tragedy. Introducing some very critical changes in the play, Wilde wrote 'Vera. Or the Nihilists, for stage and submitted it 'loftily', 'to the chief theatrical personages in London, and to the actress Clara Morris in New York' (47).

Wilde was himself a man given to socialism of a peculiar form: a blend of hatred of tyranny and proclivity to be of service to those in need. Ellmann cites the record that Rennel Rodd had made of Wilde's generosity to the homeless in a flood. They would go out and Wilde would cheer an old bedridden Irish woman with his stories and money so much so that she shouted in her comfort: 'May the Lord give you a bed in glory' (110). Wilde's politics, Ellmann proves, were grounded in sympathies and a hatred for tyranny and mob excesses (112). Vera is rooted precisely in such a mix: there is, in it, a remarkable blend of hatred of tyranny and excesses appertaining to mob-rule. In describing it to Marie Prescott, Wilde said that he had written a play in which, 'I have tried to express within the limits of art that Titan cry of the peoples for liberty, which in Europe of our day, is threatening thrones and making governments unstable from Spain to Russia' (Interviews 71). That the same political spirit would become his nemesis was probably not adumbrated by him, for Vera faced an unprecedented ban on stage on account of its highly volatile political tone.

The thematic of Vera has verisimilitude in the context of history, not of the time. It was a fact well known that the Czar of Russia at the time, Alexander II, empowered the serfs; he did have no call on Wilde's desire to portray him as a man of cruelty and misrule. Yet that becomes the basis for the nihilists to get together and want a change of establishment. Wilde interests himself at the very beginning in the excesses of the human condition: his depiction of the Czar and his rule is ridden with a pervert longing to pulverize the essential elements of free life that the human race would want – a point made by Varty (19). In doing so, he gives us an insight into the lives of peoples who suffered in the hands of tyrants and autocratic rule. It is no doubt a far cry to imagine that the dandy playwright could have conceived of anything such as a tragic play of grave consequences. For that is, precisely, the impression that Vera creates on its readers.

Wilde had known the meaning of oppression and subjugation of people by their own rulers. Although not a part of the Celtic revival (that took shape only after the advent of W.B. Yeats, who had a great respect for Wilde, and who considered him to be an integral part of the Celtic experience), Wilde, as aforesaid, had been attached distantly to the Irish cause through his mother. It is that attachment that works in shaping up the conflicts of Vera. Vera is described as a girl with 'too many ideas' in the prolog, someone who, Michael, her suitor feels, will 'never love' (Act I). Michael is the chosen one: in his possession he has 'a good grass farm and the best cow in the village, at least Vera's father is sure that she will love him. Wilde's introduction to the thematic of the play

makes use of the prolog wherein he paints the backdrop: it is Dmitri, the ‘featherhead of a boy’, who has gone ‘off to Moscow to study the law’ (Prologue). Vera’s brother might easily have chosen to stay with his family in the village but ambition takes him to strange shores - away to become a lawyer. It is Dmitri, who though he has trained himself to be a man meant ‘to break the law’, whom Vera discovered to be a man in hiding and reluctant enough to disclose his identity. Wilde had long known that people on secret missions might have the necessity to conceal their lineaments and dread being found out, he had had many a rendezvous with secret liaisons that could help develop his knowledge of those that sought their identities to be hidden and not be revealed to their families. We have here a fascination with secrets, the veils hiding the true face – something that Wilde had so assiduously layered within his own ‘self’ relating to being found out (Maclagan 34).

Yet it is Vera, who ‘is always thinking of others’, and is not the most agreeable to the spirits of her times, so we are told by Peter, who confesses in the style of the old school that it ‘is her mistake’ that she thinks always of the others before she does of herself (Prologue). This contrast was rather analogous to Wilde’s life and probably also a tragic element that Wilde sought to absorb in the larger tragedy of the play: that human nature out of sync with its times would be defeated and crushed if it became so stubborn as not to yield any ground to its extant realities (Hill 78). Peter is sure that ‘God and the Czar should look to it (the world)’; it is not his ‘business’ to allow for the disasters as they were not of his making:

‘But what business was it of mine? I didn’t make the world – let God and the Czar look to it’ (Prologue).

Amplified had Wilde seen in his Oxford days (when he assisted Ruskin) that economic hardship and destitution together could annihilate man’s power to be generous and good, and considerate and full of concern for others; it was as if he had tried hard to escape from the sordid realities of poverty into the world of aesthetes. Not very far from here would he make this observation:

‘The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible’ (Soul 291).

In writing, Vera Wilde does seem to follow for a change what he later expatriates on (In the ‘Soul’). Peter (Vera’s father) prefers to blame God for all the evils around and feels that ‘no man could live if he took his neighbor’s pack on his shoulders’ (prolog). His own concerns meanwhile revolve about an expected letter: one that Dmitri (Vera’s brother, his son) should have sent on a long time back and one that does not arrive yet again. Wilde paints the scene with simultaneous strokes using the perspectives of the father and the selfless daughter through the art of his already perfected dialogue; while Peter alleges that his son has been ‘sick of profligacy’ (ProL.), Vera defends her brother sensing that ‘some evil’ might have befallen him. The prolog is intelligently used and serves to ground the play in the emotions of an expectant father and sister vis a vis Dmitri, whose elusiveness adds to his charm until the audience is exposed to his face while he is being carried out by a group of soldiers in charge of Nihilists.

The mystery of Vera as a play, however, lies not in the many opinions it generates in the minds of its audience through the many characters that carry forward its drama, it lies instead in the priceless bearings that it offers to trace Wilde’s evolution as a great dramatist and the great insights that it offers us into Wilde’s political ‘self’. The case in point has been heavily written about: the fact that Wilde the aesthete, the dandy could have thought of liberty, of the cry of people and could have begun his career with a tragedy (Harris 56). It is also only commonplace that Wilde had not begun with a tragedy except that he tried to experiment with a great content and its concomitant, orotund style - he was moved more by the great subject matter than he was by the treatment in terms of tragedy and comedy. Ellman does mention that Vera stands out as a play of an age in which no drama, whatsoever, had been written and Wilde’s inclination towards it cannot be better explained but with its reference to the aestheticism of the great British and French tragedies of the past (98). In writing Vera, the aesthete in Wilde was experimenting with the grand fascination of the Greeks and a subject matter that no one better than an Irishman, brought up and graduated at Oxford in the Paterian currents could have taken on. It is also interesting that a peasant girl and not an upper-class man should embody revolution for Wilde. There are strong but recondite traces of his mother in Wilde’s first great character, and his subject matter is no less inspired by his mother’s Irish perspective (Gowan 256). We see thus Wilde evolving as a dramatist and conveying to his audience his political Belief. In terms of the Humeian Belief theory, this is perfectly explainable. Wilde had moved away from Roman.

Catholicism and Free Masonry (the impressions he felt the need to do without) and in his political sphere was inflamed with his mother’s impression on him. He is not Oscar Wilde, the aesthete (his ‘self’ in terms of his Paterian impressions was yet to be formed); he is Wilde the believer. His creativity may be examined by Hume’s microscope here: his mother’s Irish verses, her representativeness of the Irish cause, lend to him his nihilistic hue.

While Dmitri conveys to Vera that he had 'heard people speak of liberty one night in a café and had never heard the word earlier' (Act 1), in doing so, he implicitly refers also to the dynamic artistic inspiration that flows in all creative people. The illusion that all acts of greatness are born but in a seed of impulse is borne out first by Dmitri's confession than by Vera's; Dmitri's denial of a career in law and his decision to pursue the so called path of liberty may be said to be reflective of the creative urge for change and rebellion against the tyranny of the established artistic standards. Wilde had long worshiped Ruskin, Pater and the Aestheticism of the Pre Raphaelites; these were the treasures of liberty for him. He had also seen the society shape up their own Czars and the Czarinas, who was more than critical of the impulse to freedom and the will to be liberated, from social, sexual and historical mores. Vera may be studied precisely in that backdrop. The oath taking ceremony in the play, as Ellmann points out, was 'borrowed from 'The Catechism of a Revolutionary' by S.C. Necahayev and Mikhail Bakunin' (117), yet there was an 'unexpected English source that Wilde drew upon' (118). Wilde took the great Nihilist oath from a Masonic ritual 'Opening of a Lodge' and turned 'the Worshipful Master into the

President, the Senior Warden into the first conspirator, and the junior warden into the Second' (120). Liberty permeates the scene as it develops and takes shape and continues to motivate the characters towards their oath to free their age and their future from the yoke of the aristocracy. Amid the many oaths and courageous words that they mouth, the Nihilists wonder where the enigmatic 'she' is. It is equally mysteriously that we learn that the police are on the prowl and Vera has long been the object of their hunt. The audience is also purported to learn that 'she' is the darling of the revolution; that 'she' has been so foolish as to have ventured out alone to the Duke's grand ball as 'she wanted to see the Czar and his cursed brood face to face' (Act 1). The audience is also told that the wretched despot actually tortures 'his only son' and Michael, who asserts that Vera 'is well disguised' and is as hard as 'she wolf' to capture, wonders if there has been any news from the court. But the court is dominated by the Czar and his men; in particular, Prince Paul. Wilde had long been mystified by what the sacred Feminine can achieve, and he had absorbed it in his 'self' to bring it out in his first plays.

Wilde shows his audience glimpses of his later brilliance as he invests the figure of Alexis with grave mystery. After all, it is Alexis, who is privy to the great walls of the palace and whatever goes on behind them; Vera meanwhile is missing: the audience has only to bank on their previous exposure to recreate her innocent and pure self before them. It is as if Vera has all the aces up her sleeve: the audience is slowly absorbed in the secrets of the political and cruel world of the great Russian political master.

Wilde had avowed by now that he was a socialist (Ellmann 116). He had been led him stand in marked opposition to authority and its worst form, tyranny. It has been contended that his definition of aestheticism and socialism were akin to each other and not opposites. Created in Michael is a figure of a ruthless revolutionary who is as despotic and unrelenting in the philosophies he holds; for whom, 'a king's son never does that. You cannot breed them like that' (Act 1); the probability of a king's son being well disposed to his people is completely unheard of insofar as Michael's experience conjectures on the veracity of what has been doing the rounds. Greater suspense and drama is created when Michael cajoles Alexis into sharing the details of the palace with him without fully apprising him of his intent. Alexis complicates the mystery suspense as he wonders if he has been found out:

Can Michael suspect me? There is something strange in his manner *to-night*. Why doesn't she come? The whole fire of revolution seems fallen into dull ashes when she is not here. (Vera 1)

It is such suspicion and unrelenting philosophies Wilde had opposed throughout his student days (Ellmann 54). For him tyranny alone was hateful; be it the tyranny of thought, action, or religion. Love alone could lead man to faith in life. This is the essential conflict in Vera and Wilde gradually familiarizes his audience with its terms. Alexis is not a Nihilist purely out of his belief and sentiments for the welfare of the people: although he is a people's prince, his infatuation with liberty has, as he says, been colored with the fire of revolution with Vera's presence in the circle. It is Vera's love that has held him much as it is the force and the fire of revolution.

The president proudly reaffirms that Alexis is the bravest among them as he reads that their 'past has belonged to the tyrant, and he has defiled it; ours is the future, and we shall make it holy.' Ay! let us make the future holy; let there be one revolution at least which is not bred in crime, nurtured in murder!' (A1). It is Vera's entry that informs us that the Czar, 'the man we call Ivan' (A1), has planned to strike at the very heart of the Russian people by imposing the ruthless Marshal law; the audience is also told that nothing is impossible in Russia but reform. Vera's character is further revealed as she declares that no one any longer will suffer from the Czar's cruel and calculative schemes; they will all revolt and rise against tyranny: In Vera's character, more than he does in any other feature of the play, Wilde invited his readers to take a peek into the things to come: what

would his women characters be like is thrown light on in Vera's strength; one wonders why it could not have been the President, or Michael, or any other male character to utter the following:

'Ay, martial law. The last right to which the people clung has been taken from them. Without a trial, without appeal, without accuser even, our brothers will be taken from their houses, shot in the streets like dogs, sent away to die in the snow, to starve in the dungeon, to rot in the mine. Do you know what martial law means? It means the strangling of a whole nation. The streets will be filled with soldiers night and day; there will be sentinels at every door. No man dare walk abroad now but the spy or the traitor. Cooped up in the dense we hide in, meeting by stealth, speaking with bated breath; what good can we do now for Russia?' (Vera A1)

For all the masculine, unfeeling and brave words, however, there is a very feminine side to Vera; a kind of queerness that one may read already in Wilde's writings if one goes through the binaries observed in Vera's character: while Vera is firm that they have suffered for long and the suffering must come to an end, while she declares that her brothers will be captured and shot, she also accepts that

Alexis, you here! Foolish boy, have I not prayed you to stay away? All of us here are doomed to die before our time, fated to expiate by suffering whatever good we do; but you, with your bright boyish face, you are too young to die yet. (Vera A1)

4. Conclusion

These are not merely the binaries in Vera's character but her elemental analogy with her creator. Much as Wilde could disarm his listeners with his aesthetic idiosyncrasies, his leading lady's charisma and verve light's up the doused fire of revolution in the far away Novgorod, where she is to be to further the cause of it a day later, yet, in the depths of her emotions the fearless 'she-wolf', who is dreaded by all, is apprehensive of Alexis' fate. These are also not the lines that got Wilde his immortality, their reader can only be stirred by their tragic potential; Wilde's audience was unfortunate that he never wrote tragedy again, nor even thought the tragic element as a possible source of art. The full potential of Wilde's tragic writing remained unexplored and dormant in response to the extremely cold reception and theatrical interest that Vera and Salome were treated with. The same tragic potential may be explored in the speeches of the protagonists though. It is while we trace the inherent conflict between Wilde's tragic and his comic potential that we find how the true seeds of the irony and satire in his later comedy of manners were sown; it is as if the dramatist's urge to mourn, not appreciated and readily embraced by his audience, laughs at his audience's foibles and follies and almost deprecatingly as if it considered the higher tragic truth as unattainable for his own times and people. In that sense, Wilde's tragedies, in particular, Vera stays as the true masterpiece that maps the early progress of the dramatist's philosophy and creative evolution.

Acknowledgments

Due acknowledgment is owed to my research supervisor, Prof. Madhu Mehrotra, whose guidance influenced me to explore the argument presented herein in Wilde's early works.

References

- Anne, V. (1998). A preface to Oscar Wilde.
- Cohen, E. (1993). *Talk on the Wilde side: Towards a genealogy of a discourse on male sexualities*. Psychology Press.
- Dawson, G. (2007). *Darwin, literature and Victorian respectability* (Vol. 57). Cambridge University Press.
- Dowling, L. C. (2014). *Language and decadence in the Victorian fin de siècle*. Princeton University Press.
- Ellmann, R. (1987). Oscar Wilde, London: Hamish Hamilton. *Google Scholar*.
- Hill, L. (2012). *Maurice Blanchot and fragmentary writing: a change of epoch*. A&C Black.
- Maclagan, D. (2001). *Psychological aesthetics: Painting, feeling and making sense*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Mikhail, E. H. (1979). Oscar Wilde. In *Oscar Wilde* (pp. 275-277). Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Mikhail, E. H. (Ed.). (1979). *Oscar Wilde: interviews and recollections* (Vol. 1). Springer.
- Raby, P. (Ed.). (1997). *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. Cambridge University Press.

Biography of Author

Dr. Ravi Mishra has pursued his doctorate degree on the works of Oscar Wilde from the University of Lucknow. He is the author of *Destination Nowhere*, a work of fiction. He is the co-founder of Sahitya Adda, a literary forum in the city of Lucknow, and edits their magazine. He teaches at Modern Girls College of Professional Studies in Lucknow.