Aspects of Wilde

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I examine the idea that Oscar Wilde's writings suggest a pessimistic view of his society but a more hopeful view of humanity.

That Oscar Wilde's writings are concerned with society is surely not a disputed point. Yet the light touch and whimsical tone of much of his output has dissuaded many from attempting a serious study of this side of the writer [Stephen 1991, p.278]. This essay will examine the views of society and humanity put forward in Wilde's writings and in the process demonstrate how the notions put forward above are supported by primary, if not secondary, sources.

Specifically, we will attempt to show Wilde's distaste for the hypocrisy, snobbery and cruelty of late Victorian society (note the hypothesis put forward is that Wilde was pessimistic about *his* society; contrast this with the much more positive views of American society espoused in *Personal Impressions of America* [Wilde, pp.938-41]). We will also show that, despite this, Wilde maintained a much more positive opinion of humanity itself, manifesting itself (amongst other ways) in a belief in the capacity of the individual for acts of self-sacrifice or love, and the firm conviction that humanity was capable of altering society for the better.

We will examine works from all periods of Wilde's life, but will deal separately with those that date from before his trial and imprisonment in 1895 and those written afterwards. While it will be shown that the same basic elements—a cynical view of society, but a positive view of human beings—underpin his thinking in both these periods, the aspects of society and humanity that concerned him most changed considerably during this time.

We will also deal separately with Wilde's first play, *Vera, or The Nihilists*, which we will examine first so as to get an idea of the young Wilde's attitudes to society and humanity.

One last note: we will be examining Wilde's writings *only* in this essay. Wilde *in context* as a critic of society and humanity would be an interesting topic, but the question in this case is what can be inferred from *Wilde's* writings. The result of this alone already forms a sizeable essay!

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> CZAREVITCH: Warmed by the same sun, nurtured by the same air, fashioned of flesh and blood like to our own, wherein are they different to us, save that they starve while we surfeit, that they toil while we idle, that they sicken while we poison, that they die while we—
>
> CZAR: How dare—?
>
> CZAREVITCH: I dare for all the people; but you would rob them of common rights of man.
>
> — from *Vera, or The Nihilists* **[Wilde, p.703]**

In the opening passages of his excellent biography of Wilde, Richard Ellman refers to a letter written, by the young Oscar, to his mother. He notes, 'The person we think of as Oscar Wilde is assembling here.' **[Ellman 1987, pp.3-4]** Some similar lessons may be learned from Wilde's first play, *Vera, or The Nihilists* **[Wilde, pp.681-720]**.

While the 'slant' of the play is very different from that of Wilde's later dramatic works, there are a number of aspects to it that seem characteristic of much of Wilde's subsequent work. The hatred of tyranny and inequality (voiced mainly through the young Czarevitch Alexis) is unsurprising given

that Wilde was a child of Irish nationalists **[Ellman 1987, p.115]**, but what seems to concern Wilde more is the deleterious effect that tyranny has upon its victims: the Nihilists, whose cause is sympathetic, have been made so bitter and twisted by their sufferings and deprivation[1] that annihilation is all that they can think of. Or as Vera puts it: 'Greedy that you are of gain, every man's hand lusting for his neighbour's pelf, every heart set on pillage and rapine…' **[Wilde, p.711]**. Wilde would return to this area of concern in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* **[Wilde, pp.1174-97]** and also in his later writings from, and about, prison.

Then there are the idle noblemen surrounding the Czar, with their trivial complaints—take, for example, Prince Petrovitch's 'Since the opera season ended I have been a perpetual martyr to *ennui*' **[Wilde, p.698]**—take this, set against the backdrop of the tormented Russian people. The indifference of the upper classes to the suffering of the general populace, and their tendency, in Wilde's own words, to 'treat all the trivial things of life very seriously, and

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[1] Act Two of *Vera* sees this exchange:

> PRINCE PAUL: The people and their rights bore me. I am sick of both. In these modern days to be vulgar, illiterate, common and vicious, seems to give a man a marvellous infinity of rights that his honest fathers never dreamed of. Believe me, Prince, in good democracy, every man should be an aristocrat; but these people in Russia who seek to thrust us out are no better than the animals in one's preserves, and are made to be shot at, most of them.
>
> CZAREVITCH (*excitedly*): If they *are* common, illiterate, vulgar, no better than the beasts of the field, who made them so?
>
> **[Wilde, pp.698-9]**

all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality' **[Tydeman 1982, p.41]**[2] is another theme to which we will see Wilde return.

Yet alongside these dark portraits of society there are moments of hope. We have a young Czarevitch willing to sacrifice his own life for the freedom of Russia, and we have the Nihilist Vera Sabouroff who does just that **[Wilde, pp.699-705 & 720]**. There is even something in Prince Paul, 'the first of that series of artistic dilettantes in whom Wilde delights even while punishing them for being detached and heartless' **[Ellman 1987, p.118]**. For all his immorality, Prince Paul is at least an *individual*, thinking for himself rather than letting others do so for him (and perhaps this is true of Alexis and Vera as well, and is the true source of our sympathy for them). Wilde considered individualism to be a great virtue: in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* he wrote, 'Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism.' Those people enabled to develop 'a certain very limited amount of Individualism' are 'the poets, the philosophers, the men of science, the men of culture—in other words, the real men, the men who have realised themselves, and in whom all Humanity gains a partial realisation.' **[Wilde, p.1175]** In *Vera*, most of the characters—even the Czar!—appear to be subordinate to the society around them. It is only the individualists, Paul, Alexis and Vera, who have the power to change that society, for the better, or the worse.

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[2] The quote is in fact originally from an article entitled 'Mr Oscar Wilde on Mr Oscar Wilde', published in the *St James Gazette* on 18th January 1895, which describes a conversation between Wilde and Robert Ross. Wilde is talking about *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but his words seem quite applicable here.

> 'Wilde is on the child's side: but he knows the child will only be truly happy if it hates cruelty, treachery and poverty, if it loves loyalty, laughter – and love. These are stories by someone in love with love. As Tolstoy would say, it is where God is.'
>
> — from Owen Dudley Edwards' *Introduction* to Wilde's stories
>
> **[Wilde, pp.13-14]**

Vera shows Wilde at his most passionate, an angry young man with things to say. When, some years later, he wrote his collections of fairy-tales *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* **[Wilde, pp.271-350]** and *A House of Pomegranates* **[Wilde, pp.213-70]**, primarily with his two young sons in mind **[Wilde, p.13]**, he had to find more subtle ways of making his opinions felt. Children don't respond well to being lectured: Wilde recognised this, and hence we have these two delightful collections of 'stories from an unselfconscious father … as opposed to some assertive male chauvinist brute thundering his own dignity and morality for the edification of his wretched offspring' **[Wilde, p.13]**. Yet while it may be a 'very dangerous thing' to tell a story with a moral **[Wilde, p.293]**, the stories do all have points to make.

The Model Millionaire **[Wilde, pp.209-12]** is primarily a story of hope. Wilde subtitled it 'A Note of Admiration', admiration, presumably, for both Hughie Erskine and Baron Hausberg. The former is the voice of social concern, speaking out against exploitation and sacrificing his own comfort to help one who he perceives as needy. The Baron is another of Wilde's individualists, one who has 'realised himself' and, contrary to the expectations of the artist Alan Trevor (who could perhaps be seen as the voice, or 'wisdom', of society), turns out to be warm-hearted and generous. He is what a millionaire *should* be—a philanthropist who will help others, rather than a cynic sneering at others' good natures. In other words, a Model Millionaire. Wilde has created an ideal for others to aspire to: Hughie and the Baron have both, in their own ways, risen above the petty and selfish society around them. Even Alan

Trevor (who, one suspects, is better-natured than he likes to make out) cannot help but admire them for it. Wilde's hopeful vision for humanity has been stated in one of its most explicit forms.

Wilde was not, however, positing some simple 'one good deed deserves another' moral, as can be seen from his later story *The Nightingale and the Rose* **[Wilde, pp.278-82]**, in which the Nightingale's sacrifice is casually thrown away by the unappreciative humans. The Nightingale can be seen as another ideal, one who is, like Wilde, 'in love with love' **[Wilde, p.14]**. Her terrible sacrifice is not appreciated, in this case, because the people for whom she makes her sacrifice do not truly value love. The student can only see things in terms of their usefulness; the Professor's daughter is only concerned with material value. In both of these characters one can see an implicit criticism of society—a society that is unable to appreciate beautiful things ('Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt,' as Wilde wrote in his Preface to *Dorian Gray* **[Wilde, p.17]**), and a society that values wealth, as in material wealth, above the wealth of the soul, the wealth of love; a society that 'knows the price of everything and the value of nothing' **[Wilde, p.452]**[3].

The social criticisms in *The Nightingale and the Rose* are implied rather than stated; those in *The Model Millionaire* are more often offhand comments than direct statements. In neither case does it seem like the main focus of the story. By contrast, we have *The Happy Prince* **[Wilde, pp.271-7]**, a tale that ends with its central characters being 'transfigured [through love] and borne off to God's hand' **[Ellman 1987, p.253]**, but which takes the time on the way to mention a multitude of social injustices. Throughout the entirety of Oscar Wilde's fiction, on- and offstage, his feelings of sorrow and anger at the inequality of the world are perhaps never better expressed than in this passage:

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[3] The quote is, of course, from *Lady Windermere's Fan*; but it seems appropriate to describe the student and the Professor's daughter.

> So the swallow flew over the great city, and saw the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at their gates. He flew into dark lanes, and saw the white faces of starving children looking out listlessly at the black streets. Under the archway of a bridge two little boys were lying in one another's arms to try and keep themselves warm. 'How hungry we are!' they said. 'You must not lie here,' shouted the watchman, and they wandered out into the rain.
>
> **[Wilde, pp.275-6]**

Alongside this, we have the Princess, and the Mayor and Town Councillors, for whom (one would imagine) the well-being of the people would be of prime concern; yet their snobbery blinds them to the suffering around them.

Wilde's short stories 'often begin with disfigurement and end, like *The Happy Prince*, in transfiguration. … Most of the characters are brought to recognition of themselves, and a recognition of ugliness and misery. Wilde celebrates the power of love as greater than the power of evil or the power of good.' **[Ellman 1987, p.282]** The Swallow in *The Happy Prince* stays with the Prince, and aids the poor and needy of the Prince's city, because he loves him. Vera makes her sacrifice because of her love for the Czarevitch and for Russia. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* **[Wilde, pp.420-64]**, Mrs Erlynne risks her own reputation, throws away her chance of returning to 'society', through love for her daughter. It is this belief in the power of love, and the capacity of human beings to love, which forms the keystone of Wilde's hopeful view of humanity.

If one is looking to satirise the snobbery of the upper classes, though (or indeed for social satire in general) Wilde's plays should be the first port of call. In the short stories, even *The Happy Prince*, 'social satire is subordinated to a sadness unusual in fairy tales' **[Ellman 1987, p.282]**; the power of love is usually the main focus. The plays often include that same belief in love, but this time

Wilde has set his sights on the injustices and hypocrisies of the Victorian establishment.

In *A Short History of English Literature*, Robert Barnard comments that Wilde's plays 'dally with social topics, no more. They mostly concern themselves … with the question of whether a "woman with a past" can become acceptable to "polite society"—not a topic of vital interest if you don't think that society worth getting into anyway.' **[Barnard 1994, p.186]** Upon closer examination of the plays, however, this statement increasingly appears to be simplistic and misguided. True, in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Mrs Erlynne does wish to re-enter 'society'. But the focus of the play is more on Lady Windermere, and the validity of her moral principles[4], than Mrs Erlynne's desires. Indeed, having 'taken her chance' **[Wilde, p.459]**, Mrs Erlynne seems to have had little trouble ingratiating herself with all around her. **[Wilde, pp.436-42]** What Wilde is truly doing is to attack Victorian concepts of morality as crude and simplistic, having little to do with the goodness that they claim to represent. As Richard Ellman notes (see the footnote on the previous page), these attacks have a wider spread than may at first be apparent: those who society considers to be immoral (Mrs Erlynne and Lord Darlington) are shown to have a greater understanding of *goodness* than those with 'high' moral standards (Lord and Lady Windermere).

A Woman of No Importance features another 'woman with a past'; this time, Wilde uses the device to attack the hypocrisy and snobbery of Victorian society head-on. These attacks are quite openly voiced, and recall something

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[4] Richard Ellman comments that the play's 'critiques of catchphrases and conventional moral blame' are more 'radical' than they may at first appear. As well as Lady Windermere's forced re-evaluation of morality, he notes a comment Wilde made that 'Darlington is *not* a villain, but a man who believes that Windermere is treating his wife badly, and wishes to save her. His appeal is not to the weakness, but to the strength of her character (Act II): in Act III his words show he really loves her.' Wilde's attacks on morality are more subtle, and more far-reaching, than is apparent at first glance. **[Ellman 1987, pp.343-4]**

of the Czarevitch's speeches in *Vera* with their feelings of anger and sorrow at the inequalities of society:

> HESTER: We are trying to build up life, Lady Hunstanton, on a better, truer, purer basis than life rests on here. This sounds strange to you all, no doubt. How could it sound other than strange? You rich people in England, you don't know how you are living. How could you know? You shut out from your society the gentle and the good. You laugh at the simple and the pure. Living, as you do, on others and by them, you sneer at self-sacrifice, and if you throw bread to the poor, it is merely to keep them quiet for a season. With all your pomp and wealth and art you don't know how to live—you don't even know that. You love the beauty that you can see and touch and handle, the beauty that you can destroy, and do destroy, but of the unseen beauty of life, of the unseen beauty of a higher life, you know nothing. You have lost life's secret. Oh, your English society seems to me shallow, selfish, foolish. It has blinded its eyes, and stopped its ears. It lies like a leper in purple. It sits like a dead thing smeared with gold. It is all wrong, all wrong.
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> **[Wilde, p.483]**

Hester Worsley, the 'puritan', is considered by the English society ladies to be an excessively moralising bore; 'She is painfully natural, is she not?' comments Lady Stutfield **[Wilde, p.482]**. The irony is that her apparently unbending morality conceals a warm and loving nature, whereas the English women possess a rigid sense of social propriety that, if broken, renders one entirely *persona non grata*. Hester expresses it perfectly when she comments of these transgressors that 'They are outcasts. They are nameless. If you meet them in the street you would turn your head away.' **[Wilde, p.483]** Or at least if they are women you would: one of Wilde's main concerns in this play seems

to be the hypocritical distinctions made between the moral conduct of men and that of women. Hester's previous comment is immediately followed up with,

> [HESTER:] I don't complain of their punishment. Let all women who have sinned be punished.
>
> LADY HUNSTANTON: My dear young lady!
>
> HESTER: It is right that they should be punished, but don't let them be the only ones to suffer. If a man and woman have sinned, let them both go forth into the desert to love or loathe each other there. Let them both be branded. Set a mark, if you wish, on each, but don't punish the one and let the other go free. Don't have one law for men and another for women. You are unjust to women in England. And until you count what is a shame in a woman to be infamy in a man, you will always be unjust, and Right, that pillar of fire, and Wrong, that pillar of cloud, will be made dim to your eyes, or be not seen at all, or if seen, not regarded.
>
> **[Wilde, pp.483-4]**

In this play even more than *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde makes the distinction between morality and goodness. Lord Illingworth is considered to be (however much he might protest the idea) a moral person, but he is not a good man. Mrs Arbuthnot's past makes her, in the eyes of society, an immoral person, but she is a good woman. Terence Brown, in his *Introduction* to Wilde's Plays, writes: 'The question, for example, as to what constitutes virtue in a woman, in both *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance* is shown to have no ready answer in the moral values of the age with their simplistic, grotesquely hypocritical moral absolutes.' **[Wilde, p.353]** Even Hester comes to realise that the 'puritan' morality she has been taught is flawed, comes to realise that God is not to be found in laws and strictures, but that

'God is only Love' [Wilde, p.510]. Wilde appears to be suggesting that not only is Victorian morality flawed, but that any notion of an absolute morality is suspect; there will always be moments when it fails.

Hypocrisy is further addressed in *An Ideal Husband*. The apparently happy ending can be seen in a much darker light: there is a feeling that it is not at all a happy ending, rather an indictment of a system that allows the rich and powerful to get away with their wrongdoings. Robert Chiltern is not a Mrs Arbuthnot or a Mrs Erlynne, neither welcome in society since their youthful misdemeanours; he is a rich, well-thought-of Member of Parliament. It is difficult to feel sorry for him. When he lectures the supposed 'villain' of the piece, Mrs Cheveley, on her 'swindle', when his own fortune is based on a near-identical piece of financial trickery, he is scarcely a sympathetic character. Terence Brown reveals the dark side of Sir Robert's high society when he writes, 'Wealth is a given in the lavish interiors through which Wilde's elegant creations live, move and have their being. … Yet it is clear from this play [*An Ideal Husband*], as from all the other social comedies, that such wealth depends on British imperial power, on the aggressive control of world trade which has opened a canal to the east at Suez and is now assessing similar, corrupt plans for the Argentine.' [Wilde, p.351] Wilde does not seem to have made many explicit references to imperialism (apart from those in *An Ideal Husband*, only the dreams of *The Young King* spring to mind); his concern seems to be more that the life of the upper classes (as he says through the voice of Hester) is based on exploitation in general. The British Empire is only a part of that exploitation.

Bearing this in mind, when we hear Sir Robert, having exploited others himself, refuse to help Mrs Cheveley with her scheme, one can't help but feel that it's the classic case of the two kitchen utensils. The supposedly great and good of society may 'go over like ninepins', in Mrs Cheveley's words [Wilde, p.528], but through Sir Robert's lucky escape from ruin, Wilde creates the uncomfortable feeling that for every corrupt or immoral person that is

brought down, there are ten who get away with their crimes, and continue to, again in Mrs Cheveley's words, 'pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues' **[CW, p.528]**. For a short moment, Robert Chiltern appears to have some virtue in him when he proposes to resign from public office: sympathies are less easy to come by when we learn this is not due to pangs of conscience over his past conduct but for selfish reasons, to ensure his wife's continued support. We are left with Lord Caversham's stern warning, that we might well see Sir Robert 'Prime Minister, some day' **[Wilde, p.581]**. The hypocrites are still ruling the roost.

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> But this I know, that every Law
> That men hath made for Man,
> Since first Man took his brother's life,
> And the sad world began,
> But straws the wheat and saves the chaff
> With a most evil fan.
>
> — from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* **[Wilde, p.896]**

> When first I was put into prison, some people advised me to try and forget who I was. It was ruinous advice. It is only by realising what I am that I have found comfort of any kind.
>
> — from *De Profundis* **[Wilde, p.1020]**

In his *Introduction* to Wilde's poetry, Declan Kiberd makes a number of references to Wilde's social opinions, noting that 'in *Sonnet to Liberty* he was honest enough to admit that his own radicalism was motivated more by the idea of apocalyptic change than by a deep fellow-feeling with the victims of

poverty and oppression. His refusal to sentimentalise such victims, or to stake a claim to such empathy, would be a cornerstone of his essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*.' [Wilde, p.741] Serving two years' hard labour, along with bankruptcy, flung Wilde head-on into the world of the poor and oppressed [Ellman 1987, pp.448-9]. It was an experience that would change his opinions (or at least areas of concern) in some respects; not in others.

One of the first things to be noticed about *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* [Wilde, pp.883-99], Wilde's letters to the *Daily Chronicle* [Wilde, pp.1060-70], and, to a lesser extent, *De Profundis* [Wilde, pp.980-1059], is that Wilde is *directly* addressing issues concerning the dispossessed of society. His main concern is the horrific cruelty of the Victorian prison system, but alongside this there are wider social concerns. Of particular interest are his insights into the ways in which society fails those that it punishes, and his questioning of whether society is in fact fit to punish at all. As in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, he is concerned with creating an improved society; unlike that essay, he proposes practical, rather than philosophical, solutions, based on his own personal experiences. A case in point being this extract from the second of his letters to the *Daily Chronicle*:

> The present prison system seems almost to have for its aim the wrecking and destruction of the mental faculties. … Deprived of books, of all human intercourse, isolated from every humane and humanising influence, condemned to eternal silence, robbed of all intercourse with the external world, treated like an unintelligent animal, brutalised below the level of any of the brute creation, the wretched man who is confined in an English prison can hardly escape becoming insane. I do not wish to dwell on these horrors … So I will merely, with your permission, point out what should be done.

> Every prisoner should have an adequate supply of good books … the books that compose an ordinary prison library are perfectly useless. …
>
> Every prisoner should be allowed to write and receive letters at least once a month. At present one is allowed to write only four times a year. This is quite inadequate. …
>
> The habit of mutilating and expurgating prisoners' letters should be stopped. At present, if a prisoner in a letter makes any complaint of the prison system, that portion of his letter is cut out with a pair of scissors.
>
> **[Wilde, pp.1068-9]**

There is a very real sense of anger here, deeper and stronger than in any of Wilde's works of fiction (the same feeling is present in his *first* letter, a blistering attack on a system that sends children to prison **[Wilde, pp.1060-66]**). With some of the suggestions he makes, he does seem to have himself in mind more than anyone else; on the other hand, it seems to be his heartfelt belief that these changes would benefit *all* prisoners, and whether he is right or wrong in this opinion (or indeed any of his other opinions) is beyond the scope of this essay. Wilde, fully aware of the joys of art and literature, must have been horrified to discover a world where such things were deliberately denied; he is also quick to pick up on the way in which, by denying inmates communication with the outside world, and censoring that which is allowed, the prison system can conceal its worst abuses. Corruption and hypocrisy is to be found not just among the upper classes (Sir Robert Chiltern et. al.), but in the institutions they have created.

His comments on the degrading effect of prison life recall the Czarevitch's speech in *Vera*: 'If [the people] *are* common, illiterate, vulgar, no better than the beasts of the field, who made them so?' **[Wilde, p.699]** Wilde has returned to having as his subject matter the destructive effects of tyranny. This time, he is writing from first-hand experience.

It was first-hand experience that lead to his last literary work, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. A trooper in the Royal Horse Guards, Charles Thomas Wooldridge, was hanged in Reading Gaol whilst Wilde was a prisoner there **[Ellman 1987, pp.472-3]**. Wilde's poem is partly an *exposé* of the horrors of Wooldridge's fate, partly an indictment of the entire system of punishment that society deems itself worthy to mete out. (It also marks what is possibly Wilde's disillusionment with the power of love[5], with the famous line, 'Each man kills the thing he loves' **[Wilde, p.884]**.) Richard Ellman writes that 'In [Wilde's] comedies the miscreants were always pardoned, but in the *Ballad*, while ultimately forgiven, they are treated vindictively by their fellows, who are equally guilty. The poem had a divided theme: the cruelty of the doomed murderer's crime, the insistence that such cruelty is pervasive; and the greater cruelty of his punishment by a guilty society.' **[Ellman 1987, p.500]** The cruelty, and the hypocrisy.

In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, as we have seen, Wilde questions not just Victorian morality, but the entire notion of whether or not any kind of 'absolute' morality is possible. Building on this, the *Ballad* suggests similar notions regarding punishment (which is a result of moralising). Some of his comments in *De Profundis* also suggest that he questions the notion of punishment:

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[5] The line appears to be one of those in which Wilde draws parallels between Wooldridge's case and his own, though in Wilde's case he was the victim, rather than the 'killer', of a loved one. Richard Ellman notes that 'There would come a time later when [Lord Alfred] Douglas would ask Wilde what he meant by this line, and Wilde would reply, "*You* ought to know."' **[Ellman 1987, p.473]** 'Disillusionment with the power of love' is perhaps misguided, as in *De Profundis* Wilde puts forward the idea that it was not loving *enough*, rather than loving too much, that led Douglas to set in motion the events that led to his downfall **[Wilde, pp.1001-2]**. However, Wilde does seem to have come to believe that love could have negative aspects to it, especially if it were polluted with other emotions—hate, in Douglas' case **[Wilde, p.999-1000]**.

> Many men on their release carry their prison along with them into the air, hide it as a secret disgrace in their hearts, and at length like poor poisoned things creep into some hole and die. It is wretched that they should have to do so, and it is wrong, terribly wrong, of Society that it should force them to do so. Society takes upon itself the right to inflict appalling punishments on the individual, but it also has the supreme vice of shallowness, and fails to realise what it has done. When the man's punishment is over, it leaves him to himself: that is to say it abandons him at the very moment when its highest duty towards him begins. It is really ashamed of its actions, and shuns those whom it has punished, as people shun a creditor whose debt they cannot pay, or one on whom they have inflicted an irreparable, irredeemable wrong. I claim on my side that if I realise what I have suffered, Society should realise what it has inflicted on me: and that there should be no bitterness or hate on either side.
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> **[Wilde, p.1021]**

Wilde seems to be suggesting that punishment is only justifiable if society also takes responsibility for that punishment, by allowing for redemption once that punishment is over. He was fully aware that when he left the prison, there would be no life for him in Britain, possibly not elsewhere either: 'For me,' he wrote, '"the world is shrivelled to a hands-breath," and everywhere I turn my name is written on the rocks in lead.' **[Wilde, pp.1021-2]** If society is to judge others, Wilde appears to be saying, it must also allow for a fresh start, for a true release from prison. The Victorian penal system is inadequate and hypocritical.

Yet, with a future as an outcast to look forward to, Wilde did not give up hope for himself or for humanity. The letters to the *Daily Chronicle* are not written by a despairing man; they are written by an angry man, angry at the

cruelties of the prison system, and trying to prevent them. Wilde believed that society could be changed for the better, and was attempting to do so. And then we have this, again from *De Profundis*:

> The fact of my having been the common prisoner of a common gaol I must frankly accept, and, curious as it may seem to you, one of the things I shall have to teach myself is not to be ashamed of it. I must accept it as a punishment, and if one is ashamed of having been punished, one might just as well never have been punished at all. … If I then am not ashamed of my punishment, as I hope not to be, I shall be able to think, and walk, and live with freedom.
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> **[Wilde, p.1021]**

This recalls our first quote from the same essay, 'It is only by realising what I am that I have found comfort of any kind' **[Wilde, p.1020]**. Wilde still maintained, above all else, his belief in the power of Individualism, the power of those who had 'realised themselves' **[Wilde, p.1175]**. Declan Kiberd, introducing Wilde's poems, notes that 'Wilde's Jesus is … a man who, on the Day of Judgement, will not ask penitents why they failed to be more like him, but instead why they refused to become themselves' **[Wilde, p.741]**. Kiberd is referring to *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, but Wilde confirms that he still held this belief following his imprisonment with his comment in *De Profundis* that 'Christ was not merely the supreme Individualist, but he was the first in History' **[Wilde, p.1030]**. If Christ is an Individualist, to become Christ-like one must not attempt to copy his lifestyle, but rather, become an Individualist oneself. Wilde still believed in this possibility, for himself, and others.

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'Wilde's writings suggest a pessimistic view of his society, but a more positive view of humanity.' Having explored a wide range of Wilde's works, from short stories to essays to plays, what conclusions can we draw from our analysis?

Wilde's first play, *Vera, or The Nihilists*, shows him to be a writer with great social concerns, demonstrating a hatred of tyranny and inequality, and a keen feeling for the way that these injustices demoralise and dehumanise their victims. Set in a rather abstract Russia, vaguely based around historical events **[Ellman 1987, p.116]**, its social criticisms are likewise somewhat abstract: general philosophies, rather than references to specific social ills of the time.

It is in the later plays, the 'society' plays, that one detects Wilde's pessimism about *Victorian* society. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde uses the drawing-room comedy as a device with which to attack the hypocrisies of high society. He criticises its flawed morality, a morality that has little to do with good or bad, but is merely an unbending system of rules for conduct—a system that discriminates between men and women, between the powerful and the powerless, between the privileged and the dispossessed. In *A Woman of No Importance*, we see a woman forced into a life of ignominy because her trust was abused by a member of the peerage. In *An Ideal Husband* we see a corrupt politician able to get away with his misdemeanours without making any recompense for them. Through these images and others, Wilde creates a picture of a society that lives on the exploitation of others, posing as 'a paragon of purity [and] incorruptibility' **[Wilde, p.528]** when in fact it is made up mostly of self-interested snobs. It is also a society capable of cruel and brutal acts: Wilde's writings from and about prison paint a vivid picture of horror, of terrible punishments inflicted by a society that does not care for its people. A pessimistic view of society indeed.

Yet, throughout his life, Wilde maintained a positive view of humanity, the foundation of this being his belief in Individualism: the potential of every human being to 'realise' themselves, to fully develop their fundamental being. (One of his main criticisms of Victorian society is that it prevents many people from being able to do this.) Those capable of fully realising themselves, of achieving Individualism, are 'the poets, the philosophers, the men of science, the men of culture' [Wilde, p.1175]—the great figures of society. Wilde suggests that, in the right society, all human beings are capable of such greatness. Moreover it becomes clear, on reading *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, that he believed humanity was capable of achieving such a society.

If Individualism is the foundation of Wilde's 'positive view of humanity', his belief in love, and the power of love, is its keystone. In many of his short stories, characters are 'realised'—achieve Individualism—through the power of love, and through appreciating that power. In the introduction to this essay, it was stated that Wilde's positive view of humanity seen in his belief in 'the capacity of the individual for acts of self-sacrifice or love'. Perhaps that should be revised to 'the capacity of the individual for acts of self-sacrifice *through* love'. It is usually because of feelings of love that individuals in Wilde's writings are capable of making these acts of self-sacrifice: Mrs Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Vera in *The Nihilists*, the Swallow in *The Happy Prince*…

Following two years' hard labour, one might have expected Wilde to despair. But instead we see him writing angry, passionate letters to newspapers, attempting to change the cruel Victorian prison system for the better; while in *De Profundis* he writes tenderly of the small kindnesses shown him by friends, and by strangers too: the convict who whispered to him in the prison yard, 'I am sorry for you: it is harder for the likes of you than it is for the likes of us.' [Wilde, pp.980-1059; Ellman 1987, p.454] If prison caused Wilde to experience first-hand the extreme social ills to be found beyond the doors of high society, it did not change his opinion that humanity was capable of

changing that society for the better (else why the letters?), and it does not seem to have, ultimately, changed his belief in the power of love.

Ultimately, what these points seem to suggest is that Wilde's preoccupations—variously, throughout his life, the injustice of tyranny and oppression, the hypocrisies and snobbery of high society, and the cruelty of society towards those it deems to be wrongdoers—his fundamental convictions did not change. Through all his writings there runs a vision of an English society that is hypocritical and flawed (usually in its attitude to 'wrongdoers'), coupled with a hope that human beings, primarily through the power of love, could achieve great things—the greatest of all being Individualism, the full realisation of self.

In *De Profundis*, Wilde wrote:

> Still, in the very fact that people will recognise me wherever I go, and know all about my life, as far as its follies go, I can discern something good for me. It will force on me the necessity of again asserting myself as an artist, and as soon as I possibly can. If I can produce one more beautiful work of art, I shall be able to rob malice of its venom, and cowardice of its sneer, and to pluck out the tongue of scorn by the roots.
>
> **[Wilde, p.1022]**

At the height of his sufferings, he still believed himself to be capable of asserting, if only for one last time, Individualism; and knew that others were capable of it. However terrible society seemed, through this belief, he could have hope for humanity.

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[pp.271-351] *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*

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[pp.465-514] *A Woman of No Importance*

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In addition, many of Oscar Wilde's works found in the *Collected Writings* but not listed above were useful and informative in preparing this essay. A short list would include *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Salomé*, various poems, the introductions to the 1966 and 1994 editions of the collected writings by Vyvyan and Merlin Holland respectively, and Merlin Holland's introduction to Wilde's essays. The title of the essay is taken from a set of pictures of Wilde by Max Beerbohm **[Ellman 1987]**.

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