

PESSIMISM AND OPTIMISM

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Figure 1- Giacomo Balla, *Pessimismo e Ottimismo*, 1923. (Public domain US) ¹

*Both optimists and pessimists contribute to society.
The optimist invents the aeroplane, the pessimist the parachute....*

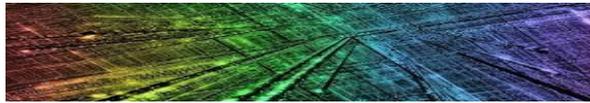
George Bernard Shaw²

I believe some of the readers, who may know me, will be surprised at my choice of "Pessimism" as the topic of an article for a magazine entitled *Gaudium Sciendi* (The Joy of Knowledge). And indeed, as a matter of fact, I only started considering it after having been reproached by an editor of one my books because I mentioned that teenagers, nowadays, tend to have a pessimistic outlook.

Actually, although some people are genetically predisposed to be more negative than others, we all know that pessimism may not be a conscious choice and that it

¹ The original title of this futurist painting by Balla (1871-1958) is *Pessimismo e Ottimismo* and it is on display at Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea (GNAM) in Rome.

² This saying has been attributed to the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters, 1926-1950*, Viking Adult, ¹1988 ISBN-13: [978-0370311302](#)



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often develops as a result of external circumstances, as was the case with the global pandemic of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). It is also general knowledge that the degree of pessimism is often connected to the conditions in which one lives. On the other hand, it may also lead, especially young people, to outperform to face hard situations, as we can say that it has also happened nowadays.

Pessimism³ has been defined as a tendency to see the worst aspect of things or to believe that the most awful will happen. It may lead one to emphasize or think only of the bad part of a situation rather than consider the good side of it. The degree of pessimism felt by an individual, or group, can often be linked to political and economic conditions in their personal lives and in their society, as I hinted above.

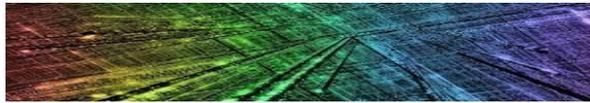
Pessimism is thought of as an exclusively negative stance that inevitably leads to resignation or despair⁴. But, according to some thinkers, there may also be benefits to being a pessimist for, in small doses, pessimism can alert people to threats and, being aware of problem areas in life, they may change harmful behaviors and adopt a healthier and less cynical attitude. Nowadays, certainly due again to the pandemic, as I've said before, there seems to be a widespread sense of cultural pessimism, which is an attitude of hopelessness toward life and survival, coupled with a vague general opinion that pain and evil predominate in the world.

When we consider those who have been designated as "The Patron Saints of Pessimism"⁵, we find names of well-known writers and great literary figures, all over the world, such as Goethe (1749-1832) in Germany, Dostoevsky (1821-1881) in Russia and Baudelaire (1821-1867) in France.

³ Frederick C. Beiser, *Weltschmerz, Pessimism in German Philosophy, 1860–1900*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 14–16. [ISBN 978-0198768715](#)

⁴ Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit*, Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2009. [ISBN-13: 978-0691141121](#)

⁵ Eugene Thacker, "The Patron Saints of Pessimism: A Writer's Pantheon", *Literary Hub*, July 19, 2018 (<https://lithub.com/the-patron-saints-of-pessimism-a-writers-pantheon/>)



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Among Voltaire's numerous works, *Candide, ou L' Optimisme* (1759)⁸ is widely recognised as the masterpiece. Candide, the protagonist, is a good-hearted but rather simple lad, whose mentor, Pangloss ("all tongue"), is an exalted Professor of "métaphysico-théologo-cosmolonigologie", who has the happy ability to explain everything that happens, despite appearances, as "for the best".

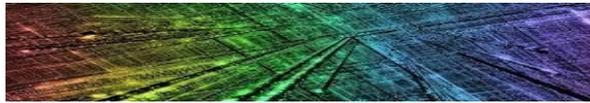
A number of historical events are frequently referred to in *Candide* and are cited by scholars as reasons for its composition, such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's publication of his *Monadologie* (1714) and the catastrophes of the Seven Years' War and of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake⁹. As is common knowledge, the earthquake had an effect on the contemporary doctrine of optimism that was founded on Leibniz's theodicy, which insisted on God's benevolence in spite of such events.



Figure 4- *The Great Lisbon Earthquake of November 1, 1755.*
Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons

⁸ Voltaire published *Candide* simultaneously in five countries no later than 15 January 1759, although the exact date is uncertain.

⁹ Voltaire also describes the catastrophe as one of the most horrible disasters "in the best of all possible worlds" in the poem that he wrote about it, which is entitled *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* (*Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, Paris: Garnier, 1877, tome 9, pp. 470-479).



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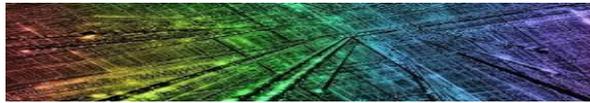
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In *Candide*, Voltaire depicts the worst of the world and his pathetic hero's desperate effort to fit it into an optimistic outlook. Thus, flaws in European culture are highlighted and various philosophical and religious theories are criticised, leading many commentators to contend that Voltaire's treatment of evil—specifically the theological problem of its existence—is the focus of the work. In this novel, besides the Lisbon earthquake, disease, and the sinking of ships in storms, he explores, as well extensively, war, thievery, and murder, which are evils of human design, hence having the opportunity to unrelentingly also attacking Leibnizian optimism.

The references made to *Candide* are justified due to the fact that it is the most widely read of Voltaire's many works and it is considered one of the great achievements of Western literature. Its popularity, nowadays, is also the result of having been adapted for the radio anthology program *On Stage*, in 1953, and opened on Broadway as a musical on the 1st of December 1956 and the BBC produced a television adaptation in 1973. It was also made into a number of minor films and theatrical adaptations throughout the twentieth century.

In Portugal, among other writers who are pessimists, we have Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) but, regarding the title of my article, I would certainly distinguish Mário de Sá Carneiro (1890-1916), the well-known poet and writer, who is one of the prominent authors of the "Geração de Orpheu"¹⁰, and is usually considered their celebrated poet, after Fernando Pessoa, who was his best friend. Sá Carneiro committed suicide in 1916, when he was studying at the university in Paris, and although he was only twenty-six years old, he left an extraordinary body of work, dealing obsessively with the problems of identity, madness and solitude and a rich *corpus* of texts that, in spite of its complexities and paradoxes, is inventive, playful and daring. Most of that work dates from the author's

¹⁰ The *Geração de Orpheu* (Orpheus's Generation) or *Grupo de Orfeu* was a Portuguese literary movement, largely responsible for the introduction of Modernism to the arts and letters of Portugal through their tri-monthly publication, *Orpheu* (magazine) (1915).



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time in Paris, and all bristle, as he says, with his distaste for the banal and the ordinary and his longing for some supreme experience...

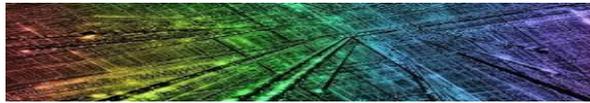
Together with Fernando Pessoa and Almada Negreiros, Mário Sá Carneiro, who has been classified as a cosmopolitan modernist, contributed to what can be deemed as a revolution in Portuguese literature and started the new aesthetic movement of Modernism.



Figure 5 - *Le Cri*, Edvard Munch, 1893, National Gallery and Munch Museum, Oslo, Norway

From a general point of view, when we consider the etymological origin of the word Pessimism, we see that it derives from the Latin *pessimus* (worst) and it denotes a belief that the experienced world is the most awful possible. It describes a general conviction that things are bad, and tend to become worse, or that considers the eventual triumph of evil over good. It contrasts with optimism, the contrary confidence in the goodness and betterment of things, as a rule.

Philosophical pessimism describes a tendency to believe that life has a negative value, or that this world is as bad as it could possibly be. In particular, it is most famously described in the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) - who influenced Nietzsche and Wittgenstein - mainly in his work *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*,



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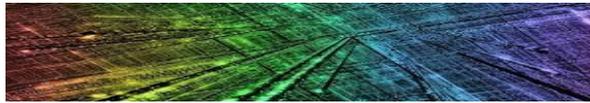
(1818/1844)¹¹. This famous masterpiece has been described as one of the most important philosophical works of the nineteenth century and is an exemplary manifestation of that type of worldview, or ethic, that seeks to face up to what it considers obnoxious realities of the world and to eliminate irrational hopes and expectations, such as the Idea of Progress and religious faith¹².

Some analysts consider that defensive pessimism has proven to be a useful cognitive strategy for some people because, if they set their expectations low, they then tend to outperform them by preparing thoroughly for a wide range of negative outcomes in advance. Indeed, this could be applied to the appalling times we are living in today. Those who - like me - defend this idea, tend to think that pessimism can be adaptive, because it alerts people to threats. For instance, pessimism and distrust of others can be negative at work but, being aware of these problem areas, may contribute to change our attitudes towards colleagues and thus promote a better atmosphere.

According to the above-mentioned ideas, we could conclude that - although different from each other - pessimists and optimists become stronger and more effective when they act together. One of the lessons we might learn from the way people reacted to the pandemic, all over the world, is that a mixed group of pessimists and optimists works much better compared to having a group composed of just pessimists or only optimists. Having a miscellaneous set in the field of health care, for instance, may lead to better collaboration and thus give us the best of both worlds in generating new ideas and

¹¹ Schopenhauer's famous work was translated into English with the title *The World as Will and Representation* in 1958 and 1966. A later English translation by Richard E. Aquila and David Carus is entitled *The World as Will and Presentation* (New York: Longman, 2008).

¹² Similar ideas could already be found in ancient texts, such as the "Dialogue of Pessimism", an ancient Mesopotamian literary composition about a humorous chat between a master and a servant, written in Babylon, around 2200 BCE, and "Ecclesiastes", one of the "Wisdom" books of the Christian Old Testament written c. 450–200 BCE.



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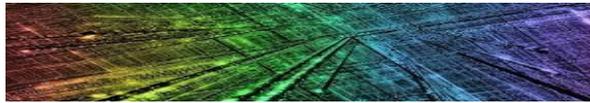
refining them to address problematic predicaments. When they work together efficiently, pessimists and optimists can ensure that processes are both innovative and thorough, thus maximizing success for the long term.

The topic of this article, as I have said, has inspired several famous and well-known writers - besides Voltaire, with his *Candide, ou L' Optimisme*, the amusing satire on the Age of Enlightenment¹³ - such as Goethe, with his renowned and sorrowful *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774) and Dostoevsky, who wrote the short story *A Gentle Creature* (1896), that has, sometimes, also been translated as *The Meek One*, and has the subtitle of "A Fantastic Story", and in which he describes the relationship between a pawnbroker and a girl that frequents his shop. Among others, I would obviously mention Baudelaire and, in his celebrated work concerning the topic, the well-known poem "Le Mauvais Moine", which he published in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857).

In Portugal, besides the haunted and dazzling prose of Mário de Sá Carneiro, to which I briefly referred to above, we have Fernando Pessoa's *Livro do Desassossego: Composto por Bernardo Soares* (1998), one of the most renowned works of this world-famous literary genius.

Besides having motivated famous writers, pessimism has, obviously, also been a source of inspiration for well-known composers, like Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) and Shostakovich (1906-1975), who went through pessimistic or despairing phases. Some scholars, however, who are specialists in the field, distinguish Chopin (1810-1849), mainly in his *4th Ballade in F minor, Op. 52* (1843) and in the *Fantaisie-Improvisation* (1834) as well as Schubert's *Winterreise Op. 89* (1828), *Die schöne Müllerin* (1823) and *Der Leiermann* (1827). Wagner, with his *Götterdämmerung* (1876), which is the last in his cycle of four

¹³ Until 1768 Voltaire signed *Candide* with the pseudonym: "Monsieur le docteur Ralph", or "Doctor Ralph" thus never openly admitting having written the controversial satire, although his authorship of the work was widely well known.



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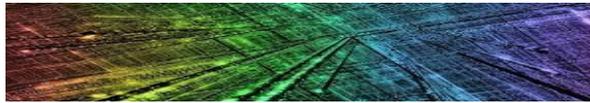
music dramas entitled *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, should also be mentioned for, besides artistic grandeur, there is much pessimistic anguish in his compositions.

Having made some references to writers and musicians who have been motivated by pessimism, I will now mention some painters who were also imbued with the same spirit. Among those who I consider most representative I have selected one from the 19th century and one from the 21st century. The first is Francisco Goya (1746-1828) with the intense and glorified series of fourteen *Black Paintings*, that this Spanish artist painted, between 1819 and 1823, and that reflect both the result of his severe illness and the situation of war in Spain - like, for instance, *The Second of May 1808* (1814) - and that deal with insanity, mental asylums, witches, satanic figures and religious and political corruption.



Figure 6- *The Second of May 1808 (The Charge of the Mamelukes)*, Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain

Among contemporary painters, whose worldview also dribble with unending pessimism, I have selected Donald Sutton (1951--) and his well-known *Disaster Paintings*, in which he expresses his thought that man is inherently self-destructive, and that whatever is built will be destroyed. This series of his powerful paintings, which date from 1984 to 1990, was on display at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., in 2017, and represents bleak industrial landscapes and forest fires and focuses on



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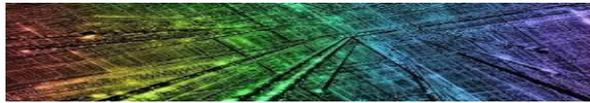
themes of industry, war, and man-made catastrophes that, according to the artist, denote our unsettling world and the bleakness of everyday toxin-belching industrial plants, like, for instance, *Forest Fire Jan 4 1984*, *Polish Landscape*, *Auschwitz 1998* or *Yellowstone Aug 15 1990*, that I include below.



Images courtesy of Smithsonian American Art Museum.

I close my references to pessimism and painting with a quotation from Donald Sutton that I think confirms what I said as it clearly expresses how he sees our world: "The series speaks to the impermanence of all things. The largest cities, the biggest structures, the most powerful empires – everything dies. Man is inherently self-destructive, and whatever is built will eventually be destroyed... That's what the works talk about: life and death."

Besides what I have mentioned about literature and art, nowadays, all over the world, it is widely admitted that we have many reasons to be pessimistic, such as all the problems related to: the pandemic of COVID 19, overpopulation, global warming, rapid deforestation and mass immigration. Some even say that robots are taking over the world and that we are at the "End of History", thus seeming to agree with Arthur



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Schopenhauer's view of the globe, when he said: "Genuine, lasting happiness cannot be a subject of art."¹⁴

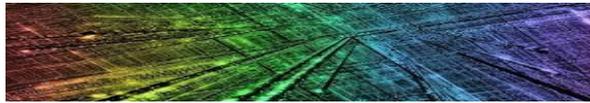
Those who think like that seem to forget that – as I have already mentioned – we need a mixed group of theorists to give us the best of both worlds in generating new ideas and refining them to address challenging difficulties. They should also realize that, when they work together efficiently, pessimists and optimists can ensure that processes are both innovative and thorough, expanding an organization's success for the long term.

In order to maximize the value that pessimists and optimists can bring to our world, we should help them to work together well, for, as we all know, a cautious pessimism, that some designate as healthy realism, is an attitude that we can practice to our benefit. We should also be conscious that there are doubts whether optimism can be learned by those who – due to their DNA and their environment - only see the downside of things, tending thus to bemoan the glass half-empty while the others, who look on the bright side, see the same glass as half-full.



Besides all those well-known names I have mentioned above, Winston Churchill (1874-1965), who is undoubtedly one of the 20th century's most charismatic and controversial figures, has also emitted an opinion on our subject when he said that a pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity, while an optimist sees the opportunity

¹⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (1859), Volume I, Book IV, § 58.



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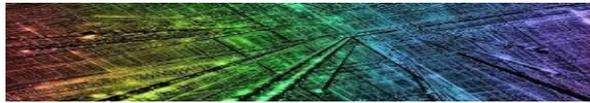
in every difficulty¹⁵. And, indeed, as we all have verified in our difficult times, Churchill was right, for there are two different strategies for coping with a complex and unpredictable world and there is not one single solution to life's challenges and we have to develop our own method to subsist with them. Some researchers even think that an excessive optimism about our life – as when we are ill, for instance – may eventually prevent our efforts to face emergency. Therefore, they consider that a certain degree of pessimism can help us survive in our world by preventing us to be too confident or dependable, thus giving us a cautionary attitude when it is needed.

This view of life will remind us the most pessimistic 19th century philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, that I mentioned above, who thought that Will was above Reason as the motivating strength of human conduct and that our daily life was only suffering.

On the other hand, among the most famous optimists, who think we live in the best of all possible worlds, we have the German scholar and rationalist Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), who was a prominent figure in both the history of philosophy and the history of mathematics, and considered that we lived in the best possible universe God could have created, thus reminding us the popular French saying: "*Tout est pour le mieux dans le meilleur des mondes possibles*". Leibniz's ideas were obviously criticised by Voltaire, who – as mentioned above - thought that optimism is the madness of insisting that all is well when we are miserable.

We can, thus, conclude that whether we are essentially optimists or pessimists may indeed be a question of our genes, and opinions differ as to whether optimism can be

¹⁵ The historian Richard M. Langworth placed the saying in an appendix titled "Red Herrings: False Attributions" in his book *Churchill By Himself*, New York: Public Affairs, U S, 2011
[ISBN13 9781586489571](#)



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learned but, as George Bernard Shaw so wisely told us the exercise of healthy realism – or cautious pessimism – is something we might all practice to our benefit.

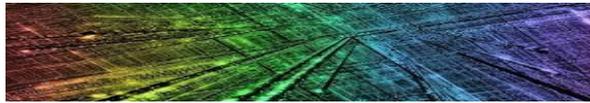
There are also those who proactively prepare for emergencies, including natural disasters, as well as disruptions to social, political, or economic order, as we have experienced in our days, and that are often colloquially designated as "preppers". A "prepper" is someone who believes a catastrophic disaster, or emergency, is likely to occur in the near future and therefore makes active preparations for it, such as stockpiling food and other supplies, thus practicing what he considers survivalist techniques. The crisis we have been living through since 2020 seems to support some of what has been designated as their post-apocalyptic and doomsday "prepping" beliefs. On the other hand, it has also demonstrated that their pessimistic worldview is somewhat wrong for, as we saw, all over the world, people were cooperative when a disaster was imminent¹⁶.

The topic of Pessimism, as we have seen, has inspired an impressive number of publications by famous writers, like Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, Camus, and Foucault and it has also been seen as a bad attitude and an unhappy psychological state. Some scholars consider it an exclusively negative stance that inevitably leads to resignation or despair and others as a necessary corrective to excessive optimism or faith in progress. Those who think like that agree with Schopenhauer who said: "Against the palpably sophisticated proofs of Leibniz that this is the best of all possible worlds, we may even oppose seriously and honestly the proof that it is the worst of all possible worlds."¹⁷

¹⁶ Scrivner, C., Johnson, J. A., Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, J., & Clasen, M. (2021). Pandemic practice: Horror fans and morbidly curious individuals are more psychologically resilient during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Personality and Individual Differences*, p. 168.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110397>

¹⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. II, Dover Publications, 1966, p. 583. ISBN-13: 978-0486217628



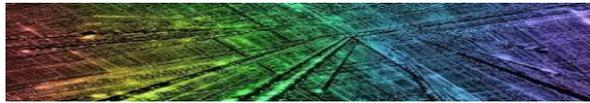
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I conclude this essay with a reference to what I mentioned at the beginning when I said that I started considering its topic due to a somewhat negative judgment that was passed to an allusion I made about the pessimistic view of the world that our young people seem to have nowadays. Consequently, I have done some research on the subject and concluded that, all over the developed globe, there have been significant changes in the educational and labour market experiences of the younger generation that are often regarded as having led to shifts in their viewpoints and values.

Given the greater unpredictability and insecurity of the conditions of life for them nowadays, some authors, who are specialists on the theme, think that a generational shift has taken place in which the modern age group has developed new perspectives towards life and work. These processes of social change have affected the orientations of young people and, consequently, they have pessimistic attitudes and social disconnection. Some scholars even think that, as a result of those changes, young people have become less focused on work and develop hedonistic life styles in which leisure and consumption are prioritized, as we all notice everywhere. Young people facing the future perceive their occupational world as insecure and they have a poor sense of belonging for their social and economic life has changed and the predictabilities that shaped the lives of the previous generation have been eroded.

Therefore, there is evidence of a feeling of disconnection that suggests the emergence of a new relationship between the individual and society in which previous social contracts have been undermined. Young people have a keen awareness of the constraints they face, and they are not optimistic about the future of an individualized society characterized by disconnection from collective life and all these processes are reflected in a weak sense of belonging and a lack of trust.



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As I have made some references to the fact that pessimism, besides inspiring writers and painters, has also motivated composers of classical music, I will now mention that it is similarly evident in the type of popular music that young people listen to and appreciate nowadays and that it, furthermore, reveals the way they see their depressing world. Indeed, when we reflect on the words of some of the most well liked songs by the younger generation, we see that they are mostly about melancholic subjects, like being vulnerable and hurt, and often centered on heartache and bitterness. Among many others that I could quote to justify my statements above, I have chosen Juice Wrld's¹⁸ most prized song entitled *Empty*, from his album *Death Race for Love* (2019) where he says:

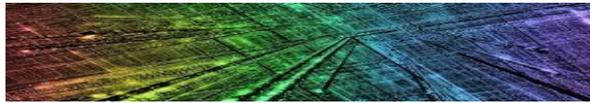
*From the unknown
I ran away, I don't think I'm coming back home
Whoa-whoa-whoa-whoa-whoa-whoa
Like a crawlspace, it's a dark place I roam
Ain't no right way, just the wrong way I know
I problem solve with Styrofoam
My world revolves around a black hole
The same black hole that's in place of my soul, uh
Empty, I feel so goddamn empty*

The lyrics of the rap artist Tom Odell's¹⁹ song entitled *Another Love*, that I quote below, are also quite representative of what I have said about young people's pessimism nowadays.

*And I'd sing a song, that'd be just ours
But I sang 'em all to another heart
And I wanna cry, I wanna learn to love
But all my tears have been used up*

¹⁸ Jarad Anthony Higgins (1998–2019), known professionally as Juice Wrld, was an American rapper, singer, and songwriter from Chicago.

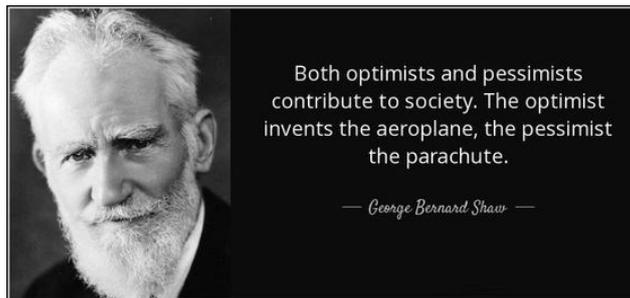
¹⁹ Thomas Peter Odell (1990--) is an English singer-songwriter, whose *Songs from Another Love* was so popular that it won the BRITs Critics' Choice Award in 2013.



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*On another love, another love
All my tears have been used up*

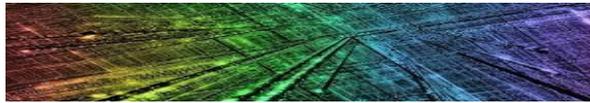


I conclude my text as I have started it invoking George Bernard Shaw²⁰, who told us that both optimists and pessimists, with their views of the universe as dreamers and worriers, and with their inventions and improvements, influence our world.

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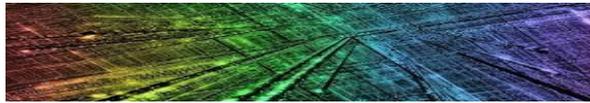
²⁰ This saying has also been attributed to the English author Gladys Bronwyn Stern (1890-1973) and to W. H. H. MacKellar of Peekskill, who wrote about it in a short article published in *The Rotarian* in May 1939.



PESSIMISM AND OPTIMISM

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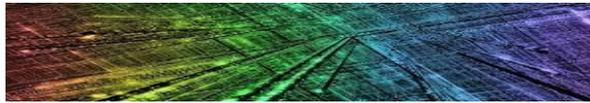


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ABSTRACT

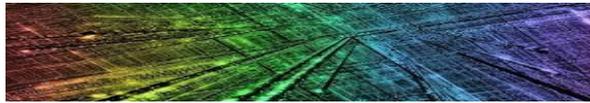
Pessimism is a view of the world that is connected to life conditions and a propensity to see the worst aspect of things that, inevitably, leads to despair. It can, however, also alert people to threats thus helping them to survive, although Schopenhauer, with his philosophical pessimism, wanted to eliminate expectations. In the difficult times we are living in today, I think it has been demonstrated that pessimists and optimists become stronger and more effective when they work together. The topic of pessimism and optimism has motivated writers, painters and musicians all over the world. Among famous writers, like Goethe, Dostoevsky, Baudelaire and Sá Carneiro, who have been considered the "Patron Saints of Pessimism", I distinguish Voltaire with his masterpiece *Candide, ou L'Optimisme*. Well-known musicians, such as Mahler, Shostakovich and Chopin, and painters, like Goya and Donald Sutton, were also inspired by the theme. Although there are also eminent optimists, like Leibniz, young people, nowadays, who see their future as insecure, seem to have a pessimistic view of the world as is evident in the lyrics of so many of the most popular songs that they so much appreciate. I conclude my text, quoting George Bernard Shaw who said "Both optimists and pessimists contribute to society. The optimist invents the aeroplane, the pessimist the parachute."

KEY WORDS

Pessimism; Patron Saints of Pessimism; Voltaire; Young generation

RESUMO

Pessimismo é uma visão do mundo que está ligada às condições de vida e uma tendência para ver o pior aspecto das coisas, atitude essa que, inevitavelmente, leva ao desespero. Pode, contudo, também fazer com que as pessoas se acautelem de ameaças, ajudando-as assim a sobreviver, embora Schopenhauer, com o seu pessimismo filosófico, quisesse eliminar a esperança. Nos tempos difíceis em que hoje vivemos, creio que ficou demonstrado que tanto os pessimistas como os optimistas se tornam mais fortes e mais eficientes quando trabalham juntos. O tema do pessimismo e do optimismo inspirou escritores, pintores e músicos em todo mundo. Entre os escritores mais famosos, como Goethe, Dostoevsky, Baudelaire e Sá Carneiro, que já foram considerados os "Santos Padroeiros do Pessimismo", distingo Voltaire com a sua obra de arte *Candide, ou L'Optimisme*. Músicos célebres, como Mahler, Shostakovich e Chopin, e pintores, como Goya e Donald Sutton, também foram inspirados pelo tema. Embora também haja optimistas eminentes, como Leibniz, os jovens, actualmente, ao verem o seu futuro tão incerto, parecem ter uma visão pessimista do mundo, como é evidente nas letras de inúmeras das mais populares canções que eles tanto apreciam. Concluo o meu artigo com uma citação de George Bernard Shaw, que disse: "Tanto os optimistas como os pessimistas contribuem para a sociedade. O optimista inventa o avião e o pessimista o paraquedas."



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PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Pessimismo; escritores, pintores e músicos pessimistas; Voltaire; Juventude e pessimismo