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English Literary Paradox: A Stylistic Analysis

The way of paradoxes is the way of truth.

To test Reality we must see it on the tight-rope.

When the Verities become acrobats we can judge them.

Oscar Wilde

Paradox, as a phenomenon, along with the examples that illustrate it, is the subject of many books and papers in mathematics, logic, and philosophy. In the present article we will concentrate on the application of paradox as a distinguishing feature of a literary language. The paradox is the basic stylistic device, accompanied by other stylistic devices, in the works of the most paradoxical writer of the nineteenth century, as the most critics agree – O. Wilde. Paradox in Wilde's masterpieces consists in stating the opposite of a received opinion; in other words, paradox contradicts not itself but common sense.

Key words: *paradox, truth, antithesis, irony, oxymoron, pun, repetition.*

Paradox is a multidisciplinary phenomenon. It appears in every field of human activity. Paradox, in logic and mathematics, means an apparently contradictory conclusion derived from apparently valid premises. Many paradoxes prove to be based on false premises or arguments, or on incomplete presuppositions. Other paradoxes are more difficult to resolve, and their study has contributed to the development of modern mathematics. Semantic paradoxes depend on language structure, and the paradox is often used as a rhetorical device in epigrams, poetry and prose.

The first known paradoxes date back to ancient Greece. The word “paradox” originated from Late Latin *paradoxum*, from Greek *paradoxos* opposed to existing

notions, from *para* against or contrary to + *doxa* opinion. A paradox, a statement which at first glance appears to be false, on further reading, seems to contain an element of truth. However, the point of a paradox is to point out a truth, even if the statements contradict each other.

Paradox is a conflict with conceptual truth; it is simultaneously the cause of doubt and the foundation of truth. The duality of the paradox phenomenon is expressed also in the following “One man’s antinomy can be another man’s veridical paradox, and one man’s veridical paradox can be another man’s platitude” [5, 76].

Paradoxical thinking is sometimes named Janusian thinking, named after Janus, the two-faced Roman god. It involves creating a paradox or contradiction by conceiving of two opposing ideas as being currently true. Thinking in terms of contradictions and paradoxes are hallmarks of creative thinking. Paradoxes create the possibility for questions that lead to inconsistency and that to solve a paradox it is sometimes necessary to re-examine even the fundamental premises. Paradox is a “train of reasoning that leads from premises that seem obviously true, via apparently impeccable steps of reasoning, to a conclusion that is contradictory or crazy” [2, 35].

Paradox is a form of amusement, but at the same time a very serious phenomenon: “an apparently unacceptable conclusion derived by apparently acceptable reasoning from apparently acceptable premises. Appearances have to deceive, since the acceptable cannot lead by acceptable steps to the unacceptable. So, generally, we have a choice: either the conclusion is not really unacceptable, or else the starting point, or the reasoning, has some non-obvious flaw” [6, 95].

Paradox is described as a discrepancy the elements of which are interconnected in an apparently logical but simultaneously absurd way. The purpose of paradoxes is not to be solved but to make a contribution to the search of truth and to the process of learning. Paradox is: 1) a conflicting interpretation of an individual phenomenon; 2) a conflicting opinion; 3) aid in understanding diverging interpretations; 4) perceptive; 5) an appropriate illusion caused by social interaction; 6) identification of different views; 7) a characteristic of the observer – not of the observed; 8) a possible consequence used negatively to define something [3, 71].

“Paradoxes are used to find, explain and justify the existence of alternative interpretations which it is thought always exist around any understanding of a complex social phenomenon. Striving to find, remove or work with paradox is thought to be insufficient; rather, paradox needs to be seen as a window through which to creatively appreciate the world” [4, 25].

Mathematicians, logicians and philosophers have been successful and are advanced in formulating the categories and classification of paradoxes. The aim of this article is to analyze the phenomenon of paradox in literature from stylistic point of view.

Literature is full of ambiguity, contradictions, and even confusion. Paradox has been used as a literary device since the earliest times. There are numerous examples of paradox in literature. These examples have always been used for the purpose of drama, to create an effect, and to communicate a basic truth wrapped under a layer of contradiction. A concept of “paradox” is a distinguishing feature of a literary language [1, 27].

Paradoxes have serious implications in the world of literature, because they make statements that often sum up the main ideas of the work. In simple terms, a paradox is a device that presents two contradictory statements to create an effect that will help understand the deeper meaning of the statement. A paradox is used in literature to bring wit and insight to a statement. It is with paradoxes that literature has been woven into the glorious texts that we behold as classics today.

Paradox is a kind of irony which is profoundly true, though at the face value it might sound quite ludicrous. Authors from different genres use this element to force the reader dig deeper and search for a meaning which is not visible in plain sight.

Nonetheless paradox should not be confused with irony (both display hidden truths): a paradox means exactly what it says; irony does not. A paradox is much more complex than irony and sometimes dependent on the other to serve its purpose. This illogical statement works as a puzzle and contains a philosophical or symbolic meaning which the author intends the reader to find. By making the readers think and work to get to the real meaning, the author cleverly disposes of boredom. Oscar

Wilde, Barnard Shaw, Bertrand Russell, G. K. Chesterton were some of the gifted authors who were adept in spinning up fine paradoxes in their works.

Oscar Wilde captured the charm of the paradox when he reputedly quipped that “paradox is a truth standing on its head to attract attention”. We are made to share Wilde’s view of the ludicrous and sinister realities behind the fashionable façade of an over-civilized Victorian society where nothing serious is considered serious and nothing trivial trivial. Wildean paradoxes often give the impression of banalities turned upside-down. The inverted relationship is the norm of the play.

The subsequent stylistic analysis of some examples taken from different plays will show that O. Wilde possessed and always used a powerful “weapon”, paradox, accompanied by various stylistic devices such as antithesis, oxymoron, pun, repetition, hyperbole, parallel constructions, simile, zeugma, changing of cliché and others.

For example, in “The Importance of Being Earnest” Lord Bracknell’s nonappearance is almost symbolic, since he is practically a non-person. He is the complete cypher, so dominated by his female relatives that Gwendolen can use the trick of the inverted platitude and describe him in the phrases that customarily justify the stay-at-home woman:

Outside the family circle, papa, I am glad to say, is entirely unknown. I think that is quite as it should be. The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man. And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate, does he not? [TIBE].

Inversion *outside the family circle*, parenthetical clause *I am glad to say*, adverbs *entirely* and *painfully*, adjective *effeminate*, rhetoric question *he becomes <...> does he not?* deepen the paradoxical quality of the statement, creating ironic effect.

Algernon is explaining his reluctance to attend Lady Bracknell's dinner party:

"She will place me next Mary Farquhar, who always flirts with her own husband across the dinner table. That is not very pleasant. Indeed, it is not even decent < . . . > and that sort of thing is enormously on the increase. The amount of

women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one's clean linen in public" [TIBE].

Parallel constructions *who flirt with their own husbands*, interjection *indeed*, negative particle *not*, adjectives with negative meaning *bad* and *scandalous*, adverb *enormously*, substitution of adjective *dirty* by adjective *clean* in the well-known proverb *To wash one's dirty linen in public* are turned into a brilliant paradox: the incongruity between moral tone and amoral content. The implication here is also inverted: a woman who parades her virtue is considered sinful.

In the following passage cliché *Marriages are made in Heaven* is also inverted – the noun “*divorce*” changes its meaning into the opposite:

Jack: *I have no doubt about that, dear Algy. The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted.*

Algernon: *Oh! There is no use speculating on that subject. Divorces are made in Heaven* [TIBE].

The inversion here equates marriages with divorces and as a result the former is deflated.

Cecily: “*the absence of old friends one can endure with equanimity. But even a momentary separation from anyone to whom one has just been introduced is almost unbearable*” [TIBE].

Cliché becomes a paradox: it is very sad to lose an old friend. Hyperbole and antithesis are stylistic devices used here.

Algernon on conventional love institutions: “*I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact* [TIBE].

Antithesis *anything romantic – nothing romantic*, *uncertainty – certainly*; repetition of adjective *romantic*, parenthetical clause *I believe* convey the inverted nature of Victorian society, especially amongst the upper class.

Lady Bracknell: “*Upon what grounds may I ask? Algernon is an extremely, I may almost say an ostentatiously, eligible young man. He has nothing, but he looks everything. What more can one desire?*” [TIBE].

The use of antithesis *nothing – everything*, adverbs *extremely, ostentatiously* create ironic effect.

Lord Goring reflects on women: “*Women have wonderful instinct about things. They can discover everything except the obvious*” [AIH].

Through the ironical reversal of difficulty in discovering things a paradox based on oxymoron is brought into being, *everything* and *the obvious* seem to exclude each other on the surface creating ironic effect.

Gwendolen: *We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideas. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits I am told: and my ideal has always been to love someone of the name Ernest*” [TIBE].

Parenthetic clause *as I hope you know*, cognitive simile *an age of ideas = my ideal* equate here the serious issue and the trivial one also creating ironic effect.

And one more example, vision of the post honeymoon tea table.

Algernon: Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter is for

Gwendolen. Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter.

Jack: And very good bread and butter it is too.

Algernon: Well, my dear fellow, you need not eat as if you were going to eat it all. You behave as if you were married to her already <...> [TIBE].

In this dialogue chiasmus and repetition are stylistic devices which help to equate the serious (the expression *to be devoted to*) and the trivial (*bread and butter*) again creating ironic effect.

The significant is deflated by an equation with the trivial in the following statement built on an incongruous juxtaposition:

Lady Bracknell: Is this Miss Prism a female of repellent aspect, remotely connected with education?

Chasuble: (Somewhat indignantly). She is the most cultivated of ladies,

and the very picture of respectability.

Lady Bracknell: It is obviously the same person [TIBE].

The dialogue is built on cognitive simile, and, as the result, virtues are deflated by the equation with those of the pejorative connotations.

Cecily sternly replies: "*If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy*" [TIBE].

Ironic inversion is emphasized with the help of antithesis *to be wicked and being really good*.

Lord Illingworth defines women as "*sphinxes without secrets*" [AWNI]. In this definition irony forms the basis of remarkable paradox: the sphinx has always been considered mysterious; preposition *without* deprives its major traits, thus the sphinx becomes nothing. Again we observe reversed values, thus ironic inversion is emphasized.

In Lord Darlington's definition of the cynic: "*a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing*" antithesis is used to equate the man with the notion of price, and more over he is compared with *the value of nothing* [LWF].

Lord Darlington's witticism based on hyperbole *everything*, which contradicts the preposition *except*, oxymoron *value – nothing* form a perverse implication: "*I can resist everything except temptation*" [LWF]. The remark creates ironic effect.

Jack wittily upbraids his friend: "*My dear Algy, you talk exactly as if you were a dentist. It produces the false impression*" [TIBE].

The noun *dentist* and the word combination *the false impression* is an allusion to *false teeth* which implicates the state of not being earnest which Algernon calls Bunburying.

Let's consider some more examples. Stylistic devices used to create ironic inversion are indicated in brackets.

Lady Bracknell: I would strongly advise you, Mr. Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over.

Lady Bracknell: Oh, they count as Tories. They dine with us. Or come in the evening, at any rate. Now to minor matters. Are your parents living?

Jack: I have lost both my parents.

Lady Bracknell: To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness. Who was your father? He was evidently a man of some wealth. Was he born in what the Radical papers call the purple of commerce, or did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?

Jack: I am afraid I really don't know. The fact is, Lady Bracknell, I said I had lost my parents. It would be nearer the truth to say that my parents seem to have lost me . . . I don't actually know who I am by birth. I was . . . well, I was found [TIBE]. (Cognitive antithesis *minor matters – parents*; pun *the season is over, to lose – to have lost*; metonymy *the Radical papers*; implied simile *my parents seem to have lost me*, metaphor, parenthesis *of either sex*).

Lady Bracknell: A very good age to be married at. I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?

Jack: [After some hesitation.] I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell: I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square. What is your income? [TIBE].

(Antithesis *everything – nothing*; epithets *delicate, exotic*; simile *ignorance is a fruit*; parenthetical clauses *fortunately in England, at any rate*; understatement *education produces no effect*).

Algernon: “*If I am occasionally a little overdressed, I make up for it by being always immensely overeducated” [TIBE]. (Oxymoron *a little overdressed*, hyperbole based on tautology *immensely overeducated*).*

Cecily: “*I should have remembered that when one is going to lead an entirely new life, one requires regular and wholesome meals” [TIBE]. (Cognitive simile *new life = wholesome meals*)*

Lady Bracknell remarks: “*I need hardly tell you that in families of high positions strange coincidences are not supposed to occur. They are hardly considered the thing” [TIBE]. (Cognitive simile *coincidences = the thing*)*

Cecily: “*Today I broke off my engagement with Ernest. I feel it is better to do so. The weather still continues charming” [TIBE]. (Cognitive simile *engagement = weather*).*

Lady Bracknell: “*I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I hadn’t been there since her poor husband’s death. I never saw a woman so altered. She looks quite twenty years younger” [TIBE]. (Cognitive antithesis, the effect of defeated expectancy).*

Algernon: “*I heard her hair has turned quite gold from grief” [TIBE]. (Cognitive antithesis).*

Jack: “*Now produce your explanation and make it improbable” [TIBE]. (Cognitive antithesis)*

Lady Bracknell: “*The General was essentially a man of peace, except in his domestic life” [TIBE.] (Cognitive antithesis).*

Algernon: “*My dear boy, I love hearing my relations are abused. It is the only thing that makes me put up with them at all. Relations are simply a tedious pack of people, who haven’t got the remotest knowledge of how to live, nor the smallest instinct about when to die” [TIBE]. (Direct address *my dear boy*; understatement *the only thing*; cognitive oxymoron *I love <...> relations are abused*, metaphor *relations are a pack*, antithesis *to live – to die*).*

Jack: “*Then a passionate celibacy is all that any of us can look forward” [TIBE] (Cognitive oxymoron).*

Gwendolen: “*This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last” [TIBE] (Cognitive oxymoron *terrible – will last*).*

Algernon: My dear Aunt Augusta, I mean he was found out! The doctors found out that Bunbury could not live, that is what I mean – so Bunbury died.

Lady Bracknell: He seems to have had great confidence in the opinion of his physicians [TIBE]. (Antithesis *to live – to die*; pun *to find out*).

Lord Goring: “*Only people who look dull ever get into the House of Commons, and only people who are dull ever succeed there*” [AIH]. (Anaphora *Only people*, parallel constructions *who look dull ever get, who are dull ever succeed*; pun *look dull, are dull*).

Mr. Dunby’s remark: “*In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it” [LWF]. (Understatement *only two tragedies*; antithesis *not getting – getting*).*

Chasuble: These are very joyful tidings.

Miss Prism: After we had all been resigned to his loss, his sudden return seems to me peculiarly distressing [TIBE]. (Antithesis *loss – return, joyful – distressing*).

Lady Bracknell: [Sitting down.] You can take a seat, Mr. Worthing.

[Looks in her pocket for note-book and pencil.]

Jack: Thank you, Lady Bracknell, I prefer standing.

Lady Bracknell: [Pencil and note-book in hand.] I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has. We work together, in fact. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke?

Jack: Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.

Lady Bracknell: I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is. How old are you? [TIBE]. (Metonymy *you are not down on my list*, comparison *the same list as the*

dear Duchess of Bolton has, cognitive antithesis and defeated expectancy I smoke – I am glad to hear it).

Algernon: What shall we do after dinner? Go to the theatre?

Jack: Oh, no. I loath listening.

Algernon: Well, let us go to the club?

Jack: Oh, no. I hate talking.

Algernon: Well, what shall we do?

Jack: Nothing.

Algernon: It is awfully hard work doing nothing [TIBE].

(Parallel constructions *What shall we do, I loath listening, I hate talking, Oh, no*; ellipsis *Go to the theatre? Oh, no*; adverb *awfully*; oxymoron *hard work – doing nothing*).

Algernon: Oh! I am not wicked at all, cousin Cecily.

Cecily: If you are not, then you have been certainly deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope that you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy [TIBE].

(Antithesis *deceiving, a double life, wicked – good*)

Algernon: I haven't been christened for years.

Jack: Yes, but you have been christened. That is the important thing.

Algernon: Quite so. So I know my constitution can stand it [TIBE].

(Antithesis *haven't been christened – have been christened*, stylistic tautology *christened – the important thing*).

The above analysis proved the idea – a paradox is not just a witty or amusing statement. Paradoxes have serious implications in the world of literature, because they make statements that often sum up the main ideas of the work. Paradoxes seem to reflect and embody the sorts of linguistic rebellion, innovation, deviation, and play, which have become the dominant criteria of literary value.

Paradox is a statement that, despite sound (or apparently sound) reasoning from acceptable premises, leads to a conclusion that seems senseless, logically

unacceptable, or self-contradictory. It can be an opinion that conflicts with common belief. However, this seemingly contradictory statement may nonetheless be true.

Paradox in Wilde's masterpieces consists in stating the opposite of a received opinion; that is, paradox contradicts not itself but common sense.

O. Wilde's basic aesthetic principles were based on three ideas: that art is life, that art must be moral, ethical and positive, and that art, similar to life, is wholly paradoxical.

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Sources of illustrative material

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<httpswww.google.com.ua#q=an+ideal+husband+pdf>

AWNI = Wide O. A Woman of No Importance

<http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/oscar-wilde/woman-no-importance.pdf>

TIBE = Wide O. The Importance of Being Earnest. A Trivial Comedy for Serious People <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/844/844-h/844-h.htm>

LWF = Wide O. Lady Windermere's Fan

<http://www.literaturepage.com/read/lady-windermeres-fan.html>