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VICTORIAN DRAMA AND PARADOXES OF OSCAR WILDE (BASED ON *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*)

Summary. The article examines Oscar Wilde’s contribution to the development of late Victorian drama, situating his work against the broader background of nineteenth-century British theatre. Despite Britain’s rich dramatic heritage, the post-Renaissance period was marked by an unexpected decline in serious dramaturgy; Victorian theatre flourished as popular entertainment but was rarely regarded as genuine literature. English stages of the time were dominated by melodrama, farce, operetta, and spectacular showpieces that avoided socially challenging topics. Against this backdrop, Oscar Wilde emerged as one of the few dramatists who successfully combined the demands of commercial theatre with artistic sophistication.

The study focuses on *The Importance of Being Earnest* as Wilde’s most accomplished play, analysing how he adapts classical comic forms to his contemporary milieu and blends Victorian sensibilities with structural and linguistic innovation. Particular attention is given to Wilde’s use of paradox, which functions not only as a stylistic hallmark but also as a rhetorical instrument for exposing the pretensions and moral contradictions of upper-class society. Through paradoxical character construction, plot inversion, antipropverbs, and epigrammatic wit, Wilde reveals the instability of seemingly fixed social values and challenges conventional Victorian notions of sincerity, identity, and morality.

Methodologically, the article draws on stylistics, discourse analysis, and pragmatic approaches to literary language. This interdisciplinary framework makes it possible to demonstrate how Wilde’s linguistic strategies generate comic effect while simultaneously critiquing the ideological norms of his age. The study thus contributes to a more balanced understanding of Wilde’s dramaturgy, highlighting the innovative nature of his comic technique and his role in revitalizing British drama at the end of the nineteenth century.

Key words: Victorian drama, Oscar Wilde, paradox, antithesis, comedy of manners, farce

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ВІКТОРІАНСЬКА ДРАМА ТА ПАРАДОКСИ ОСКАРА УАЙЛЬДА (НА МАТЕРІАЛІ КОМЕДІЇ «ЯК ВАЖЛИВО БУТИ СЕРЬОЗНИМ»)

Анотація. *Стаття присвячена аналізу внеску Оскара Уайльда у формування пізньовікторіанської драми з огляду на ширший контекст театрального процесу XIX століття у Великій Британії. Попри давню й багату драматургічну традицію, англійський театр після доби Ренесансу переживав суттєвий занепад серйозної драматичної літератури: вікторіанська сцена процвітала як видовищна, здебільшого комерційна індустрія, проте її нечасто трактували як повноцінне мистецьке явище. Британський театр був представлений мелодрами, фарсами, оперетами та розважальними постановками, що уникали соціально гострих питань. На цьому тлі Оскар Уайльд постає одним із небагатьох письменників, яким удалося поєднати комерційний успіх із високою художньою культурою.*

У центрі дослідження – п'єса «Як важливо бути серйозним», слушно визнана найвищим досягненням драматурга. Розглянуто, у який спосіб Уайльд творчо переосмислює класичні комічні форми й адаптує їх до свого культурного середовища, поєднуючи неповторно вікторіанську чутливість із структурними та мовно-стилістичними інноваціями. Особливу увагу зосереджено на феномені парадоксу, який постає не лише як характерна риса авторського стилю, а і як риторичний та соціокритичний інструмент. Парадокс Уайльда є способом сатиричного висвітлення суперечностей вищих суспільних кіл, демонструє умовність і штучність їхніх моральних норм, а також переосмислює базові вікторіанські уявлення про щирість, ідентичність і «пристойність».

Методологічну основу дослідження становить комплексний підхід, що поєднує стилістичний аналіз, також дискурсивний та прагматичний підходи до художнього мовлення. Такий міждисциплінарний ракурс дає змогу простежити семантичні, комічні й критичні функції парадоксу, розкрити його роль у формуванні естетики п'єси та в структурі характеротворення. Отже, дослідження пропонує більш збалансоване розуміння драматургії Уайльда, наголошуючи на новаторському характері його комічної техніки та ролі в оновленні британського театру кінця XIX століття.

Ключові слова: Вікторіанська драма, Оскар Уайльд, парадокс, антитеза, комедія манер, фарс.

Statement of the problem. British theatrical tradition, so brilliantly shaped by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, entered a long period of uncertainty after the Renaissance – a paradoxical era in which the nation that produced the world's greatest dramatist generated surprisingly little drama of lasting artistic value. Even in the 19th century, during the Victorian period so well recognized for the great achievements in fiction and poetry, drama, according to many scholars, was not considered part of serious literature. Authors of a prestigious edition of McDougal Littell series write: «The Victorian era was not an age of great drama» (McDougal, 2007, p. 837). Sara Hudston quotes Henry James who found the London theatres of the time expensive and mediocre: «a social luxury and not an artistic necessity» (Hudston, 2000, p. 1).

It is only by the late nineteenth century that the stage had undergone a profound transformation. Such playwrights as Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw managed to reconcile popular entertainment with genuine artistic innovation, revitalizing Victorian drama.

Analysis of research and publications. Scholars who research Victorian culture and drama (R. Garnie, S. Hudston, R. Jackson) note that the theatrical life of that period was remarkably diverse and steadily growing in popularity. The repertoire included stage adaptations of the novels by such canonical authors as Dickens and Hardy, along with melodramas, farces, spectacular thrillers with stage effects. Among other widely spread theatrical events were music hall acts, full-length comic operas, drawing-room comedies, burlesque, the ballet, plays starring horses and dogs, plays featuring human freaks, sentimental farce, extravaganza, pantomimes, penny theatres, beast shows. Despite this impressive variety and mass appeal, Victorian theatre was not regarded in terms of literature but rather as a popular entertainment. On the continent, such dramaturgists as Ibsen and Strindberg were introducing psychological elements and experimental dramaturgy, but British authors avoided 'edgy' questions and controversial or socially sensitive issues which were considered repugnant and unseemly.

As R. Gagnier observes, Victorians felt «satisfied with their empire and its dominant place in the world» yet deeply preoccupied with questions of «family values, British values, [and] value as use or exchange» (Gagnier, 2004, p. 18); their liberal views «masked differences and inequalities» (Gagnier, 2004, p. 19).

Within this context, Oscar Wilde, celebrated as «a leading wit and conversationalist in London society» (Law, 2011, p. 544), employed his brilliant wit as a means of resisting dominant ideological structures. In his plays, he exposes the contradictions underpinning Victorian notions of modernity and challenges what Gagnier terms the «ideological and repressive state apparatuses» of school, marriage, family, medicine, law, and prison (Gagnier, 2004, p. 20). Central to Wilde's critique is his conviction that the individual is shaped by society and that the self is «socially constructed ... through language» rather than stable or inherently rational (*ibid.*). This belief partly explains his resistance to formulaic speech patterns and his persistent use of epigram, paradox, and linguistic subversion.

While fully aware of prevailing theatrical fashions, Wilde was also a classical scholar with good knowledge of the comic tradition from Greek antiquity onward. He skillfully reworked classical comic forms to suit contemporary cultural realities, creating plays that merged the conventions of popular Victorian entertainment with structural principles inherited from earlier drama. This synthesis enabled him not only to delight audiences but also to expose the pretensions and contradictions of the society he depicted.

The Importance of Being Ernest bears the features of farce and comedy of manners – both delighted theatregoers since theatre itself began. Farcical plays are «characterized by broad humour and a complicated and improbable plot» (Law, 2011, p. 180). Farce is driven by restless desire and sudden impulses, by obstacles that must be overcome, and by elaborate plots that rush toward their expected reward. As a genre it is full of vitality, bold performance, and 'unapologetic' self-display. It allows audiences to recognize their own weaknesses and aspirations mirrored onstage and to laugh at themselves while gaining a clearer sense of human behavior.

Comedy of manners, on the other hand, is «a form of sophisticated comedy, usually set

among the fashionable upper classes, in which the characters' machinations are veiled by their elegant manners and elaborate repartee» (Law, 2011, p. 120). Both genres served Wilde's purpose to create a light and funny comedy that mocks and ridicules human vices. Paradox became Wilde's sharpest instrument for questioning Victorian norms, exposing hypocrisy, destabilizing Victorian moral certainties, and challenging linguistic conventions.

Paradox, a word of Greek origin (combination of the prefix *para-* ('beyond' or 'outside of') with the verb *dokein* ('to think') forms *paradoxos*) originally meant «contrary to expectation» and denoted a statement which could «take us outside our usual way of thinking» (Webster, 2025). Contemporary understanding of the paradox partly preserves the same meaning: «an expression so surprisingly self-contradictory as to provoke us into seeking another sense or context in which it would be true» (Baldick, 2001, p. 183).

The defining semantic component of the term, as observed in the majority of dictionaries, is its being a statement which is «apparently or seemingly self-contradictory» (Wales, 2014, p. 300) or «self-evidently false» (Leech, 1991, p. 132). In linguistics, paradox is regarded as «a term used for cases in which two incompatible ways of ordering rules are both well motivated» (Crystal, 2008, p. 61), a «structural-semantic unity in which stylistic effects are generated by violations of the semantic and semantic-syntactic compatibility of its components» (Яловенко, 2015, p. 190).

As we see, the definitions of the term itself also highlight the logical component of the statement, or rather, its alogism, its contradiction to established patterns. The particular appeal of paradox lies precisely in the unexpectedness and contradictory nature of the judgment. However, the contradiction may reveal itself as an unconventional and original assessment of rather stereotypical phenomena or situations, their new unexpected interpretation. As Alex Preminger puts it, «on closer examination [paradox] proves to have unexpected meaning and truth» (Preminger, 1993, p. 876), so the seeming absurdity of some judgments can often be resolved through an analysis.

Despite this opinion, many paradoxical utterances remain enigmas, resembling existen-

tial contradictions that point to the inherent limits of how fully we can comprehend the world and its underlying processes. Therefore, paradoxes are particularly frequent in religious and mystical texts, where they often take the form of aphorisms. They also constitute a vital component of poetic expression, reflecting the contradictory nature of the world it seeks to imitate. While ancient rhetoricians treated such paradoxes as a figure of speech, in the 20th century its significance expanded, achieving «a higher importance as a mode of understanding by which poetry challenges our habits of thought» (Baldick, 2001, p. 183). It should be mentioned that from literature, paradoxes moved to everyday life where they became widely used denoting any opinion that is different from the conventional views (Голянич, 2011, p. 155).

Being so wide-spread but under-researched, paradox inspires certain interest. In Oscar Wilde's work, it performs an aesthetic and critical function, as it constructs wit and humor and simultaneously exposes contradictions of Victorian values. Majority of the critical works on Wilde's paradoxical style, however, deal with his aphorisms in a very general way and rather in the context of the writer himself. Therefore, this topic still requires further research.

This publication focuses on Wilde's most celebrated play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, examining how the playwright merges distinctly Victorian sensibilities with dramatic innovation to produce one of the most enduring comedies of the nineteenth-century English theatre.

The aim of this paper is to examine the functions of paradox in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, focusing on its role in the linguistic, structural, and rhetorical construction of comic meaning and social critique in late Victorian drama. **Its objectives** are 1) to identify the principal types of paradox employed in play at the levels of plot, character construction, and language; 2) to analyse paradox as a linguistic and rhetorical strategy realised through epigram, antithesis, irony, hyperbole, and the subversion of fixed meanings; 3) to demonstrate how Wilde's paradoxical discourse exposes the artificiality and ideological contradictions of Victorian upper-class morality; 4) to situate Wilde's paradoxical technique within the broader context of late Victorian theatrical prac-

tice, highlighting its contribution to the renewal of British drama.

The methodological basis of this study combines elements of stylistic analysis, discourse analysis, and pragmatics, with particular attention to the semantic and rhetorical functions of paradox which will help to interpret how Wilde's use of paradoxical statements challenges conventional categories of meaning and to illustrate cognitive dissonance underlying Victorian norms and morals.

Presentation of the material. It should be mentioned that Wilde himself was «a figure of paradox and contradiction» (Gagnie, 2004, p. 18) for whom paradox was «both a literary device and a way of thinking» (Атаманчук, 2022, p. 777). In a society that prided itself for rational thinking and utilitarian approaches to life, Wilde dared to defend different aesthetic principles, believing that art and beauty should be valued for their own sake. Wilde's entire aesthetic system is built on paradoxical judgments aimed at Victorian morality – an ideology he challenged both through his writing and through his own life.

The literary style based on paradoxes, witty remarks, and epigrams which Wilde developed and which became, as Joseph Bristow puts it, «Wilde's trademark» (Bristow, 2026, p. xxix), was not, in words of Nicholas Framkel «ends in themselves», but rather «expression of a distinctly provocative intellectual intent» (Framkel, 2004, p. 3). The scholar further explains, that humor and paradox «encapsulated not merely Wilde's drive to provoke and destabilize the staid formulas of sound judgment and earnest belief, but also a dialectical understanding of truth, built on the notion that any utterance contains and even presupposes its opposite» (Framkel, 2004, p. 4). Wilde himself states in his essays: «The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks» (Wilde, 1994, p. 1173) and «to know the truth one must imagine myriads of falsehoods» (Wilde, 1994, p. 1143).

It is interesting to notice, that Wilde didn't use paradoxes in his early writings. Rolf Breuer examines the evolution of his style in «Paradox in Oscar Wilde» from the first verbal and stylistic witticisms, which sounded funny even without the context and didn't influence it much, through the stage when Wilde's paradoxes became «a matter of rhetoric and style» (Breuer, 1993, p. 234), and to a final synthesis of all aspects in his works.

The comedy *The Importance of being Earnest* offers the best material for such study. Breuer comments: «Never were Wilde's epigrams and paradoxes wittier and funnier than here, but what is important is that they are artistically integrated so that a unity of rhetoric and structure, of form and content is achieved» (Breuer, 1993, p. 232-233). This might be the reason, why, according to Russel Jackson, it is one of the few plays from (late Victorian) period to remain in theatrical repertoires, outlasting most of the trivial and almost all the serious works of Wilde's contemporaries (Jackson, 2004, p. 165).

The paradox in the play starts immediately with the title: *The Importance of being Earnest. A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*. Alongside Wilde's wordplay – most notably the pun on the name *Ernest* and the characteristic *earnest* («very serious and sincere» (Oxford, 2025), the subtitle deepens the paradox through the deliberately incongruous word *trivial* («not important or serious; not worth considering» (Oxford, 2025). This contrast sets *trivial* against both *serious* and *earnest*, creating a fusion of «seriousness and play, profundity and superficiality» (Breuer, 1993, p. 233).

Secondly, the comedy is full of paradoxes both in its plot and the use of language.

The opening scenes of the play focus on a young gentleman who leads double life and calls himself Jack in the country and Ernest in the city. He proposes to a young girl of upper class, Gwendolen, who wants to marry someone (or, rather, anyone) whose name is Ernest. Although Jack / Ernest's uncertain lineage – he was found in a bag forgotten in Victoria Station and has no influential parents – presents an obstacle in his chances to marry Gwendolen, by the end of the play he finds out that he was born to a rich family and was actually christened Ernest. Thus, the main character of the play is himself a moral paradox and a complex symbol of Victorian hypocrisy: he starts a play neither 'Ernest' nor 'earnest', a liar who for years was easily deceiving his family and friends, but finishes it becoming both 'Ernest' and 'earnest.' He apologizes to Gwendolen in a paradoxical way, saying: «*a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?*» And she responds: «*I can. For I feel sure that you are sure to change*» (Wilde, 1994, p. 175) – the reply not

less paradoxical in its nature, for he apologizes for telling the truth and she expresses her belief that he will change and it won't happen again. Such inversion of conventional morality reveals both Wilde's humoristic mockery of young people of upper class and a deeper criticism of hypocrisy of Victorian society.

Jack's friend and, as it later turns out, a cousin – Algernon, is a typical dandy: witty, brilliant, amoral, overdressed, fun- and food-loving, self-styled philosopher who speaks in epigrams and paradoxes. Much of the humor that his speech provokes arises from 'inverted expectations': his strange remarks are reminiscent of conventional pieces of wisdom, but, in a way, turned 'inside-out' and reveal ideas that are contrary to what might be expected, as in the example: «*Divorces are made in Heaven*» (Wilde). Many of such expressions are funny but at the same time serve to expose society's inverted morals. Scholars agree that to a very large extent, Algernon is a self-portrait of Oscar Wilde himself.

Algernon's love interest, Cecily, who happens to be Jack's ward, doesn't use epigrams or witty remarks. But she's a moral eccentric fascinated with an idea of 'wickedness': «*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*» (Wilde, 1994, p. 139) – she says to Algernon. Wilde makes fun of the Victorian idea of morality as a set of rules about what people should or shouldn't feel or do. Cecily is open and quite sincere in her remarks. Basically, she is Gwendolen's antithesis, being brought up in the country, unspoiled and full of wicked fantasies.

Thus, paradox functions in the play as a structural principle. Wilde builds his comedy around figures who embody contradictions: Jack, who becomes «Ernest» only by ceasing to be earnest; Algernon, whose dazzling inversions expose the absurdity of social maxims; Gwendolen and Cecily, whose ideas and ideals contradict moral codes. In this way, Wilde's paradoxes illuminate the dissonance between appearance and reality at the heart of polite society while sustaining the play's uniquely light yet incisive tone.

However, to fully appreciate Wilde's paradoxical style, it's necessary to look at the language of the comedy, which is full of witticisms, epigrams and controversial remarks.

One of the sources for paradoxical statements in *The Importance* is proverbs, «short popular saying of unknown authorship, expressing some general truth or superstition» (Baldick, 2001, p. 208). It's a conventional expression that bears moral lesson or a piece of advice. Oscar, however, deliberately alters the traditional phrases to produce new, usually humorous meanings. For example, one of Algernon's most famous paradoxical witticisms: «*Divorces are made in Heaven*» (Wilde, 1994, p. 359) is actually a reversal of traditionally excepted «*Marriages are made in Heaven*». Juxtaposition of two opposite ideas – marriage and divorce – shows inverted moral values of Victorian social conventions.

The comedy is abundant on similar moral 'anti-proverbial' paradoxes. Contradiction can be recognized in Algernon's statement: «*In married life three is company and two is none*» (Wilde, 1994, p. 363) which is built, again, on a famous saying: «two's company, three's a crowd» or a similar variation «two's company, three is none». Putting the inverted statement in the context of marriage, Wilde created a sharp contrast and humorous twist.

Another source of paradoxes is epigrams, «a wittily condensed expression in prose» (Baldick, 2001, p. 83), which can also be both funny and serious. For example, a paradox in: «*The truth is rarely pure and never simple*» (Wilde, 1994, p. 362) is created through the opposition between *truth*, traditionally associated with purity and simplicity, and, as implied here, *reality* which, the comedy shows, is complex and morally compromising. Another example of a paradox in the form of an epigram is Algernon's remark about his family: «*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*» (Wilde, 1994, p. 370). The young dandy completely reverses conventional ideas and attitudes towards one's relatives. This paradoxical expression, which takes the form of a hyperbolized but comic insult of one's family – *a tedious pack of people* who are supposed to know when to die – reveals the speaker's cynicism and mocks social conventions.

Great number of paradoxes in *The Importance* are built on antithesis, a stylistic device which «effectively contrasts ideas by contrasting lexical items in a formal structure of parallelism»

(Wales, 2014, p. 25). It enhances the expressiveness through sharp opposition or contrast of concepts and images.

A dryly humorous servant in Algernon's household says: «*Marriage was a consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person*» (Wilde, 1994, p. 358). The juxtaposition of «marriage» and «misunderstanding» forms an antithesis and creates comic effect.

Paradoxical statement built of antithesis became a key element of Wilde's style and, as mentioned above, it starts immediately in the title which sets 'importance' and 'seriousness' against the 'trivial', thus creating the first antithetical contrast.

Another way to build paradox is through irony and hyperbole. When Lady Blacknell refuses to allow Gwendolen to marry Jack, the distressed girl says: «*The old-fashioned respect for the young is fast dying out. Whatever influence I ever had over mamma, I lost at the age of three*» (Wilde, 1994, p. 134). The ironic effect is created through the demand for the respect for the young which contradicts a more common complaint of the loss of respect for the old. The humor is further intensified by the exaggeration «at the age of three».

Most humorous exchanges between the characters of the play are built on inverted expectations. Miss Prism (the governess) says to Cecily: «*...you should certainly not be so much in the open air. The fact is, you have fallen lately, Cecily, into a bad habit of thinking for yourself. You should give it up*» (Wilde, 1994, p. 391). Wilde openly criticizes the system of home education for young girls here, and generally, the expectations the Victorian society held towards women.

Finally, linguistic paradoxes are created when Wilde uses words in contexts where they lose their fixed meanings thus producing comic confusion. When Jack, bored with country life, says «*When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people*» (Wilde, 1994, p. 358) he creates a paradoxical statement where the verb *amuse* has a subtle shift in meaning: in town, it denotes self-entertainment, while in the country, it refers to providing pleasure to others, highlighting how the same action changes purpose depending on social context. The paradoxical apho-

rism: «*All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his*» (Wilde, 1994, p. 371) – focuses on the word *tragedy* which in this context acquires a humorous shade of meaning. In «*In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing*» (Wilde, 1994, p. 406) – the word *grave* (serious / death-related) creates double meaning through its ambiguity.

The language itself becomes the target of Wilde's criticism. Jack reprimands Algernon: «*You talk exactly as if you were a dentist. It is very vulgar to talk like a dentist when one isn't a dentist. It produces a false impression*» (Wilde, 1994, p. 361). Repetitions and parallel construction make this absurd statement memorable. Comic effect is created by juxtaposing words that logically are not connected – *dentist, vulgar*. Metalinguistic component (speech about speech) creates a paradox that talking like someone produces a false impression – a remark which is true and false at the same time. Victorian society uses language to hide reality: «*My dear fellow, the truth isn't quite the sort of thing one tells a nice, sweet, refined girl*» (Wilde, 1994, p. 371). Words, thus, become the instrument of social behavior rather than communication.

Conclusions. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, paradox functions both as a linguistic device and as a structural principle, defining the play's comic logic and its social critique. Wilde creates a world in which contradictions define characters, actions, and even the language they use, thereby revealing the profound discrepancies between the appearance and reality of Victorian society. His manipulation of proverbs, inversion of moral maxims, reliance on antithesis, hyperbole, and irony, as well as his frequent violation of established lexical meanings not only generate the play's wit but

also expose the artificiality of upper-class values. Ultimately, Wilde's paradoxes illuminate the emptiness of socially approved norms and demonstrate how comedy, through deliberate contradiction, can serve as a powerful instrument of cultural critique.

In this sense, Wilde's paradoxical technique may be seen as a key factor in the renewal of late Victorian drama, allowing him to reconcile the demands of popular theatre with a sophisticated critique of language, morality, and social identity. Unlike both Victorian melodrama and continental psychological realism, Wilde's comedy revitalizes the English stage through linguistic play and structural inversion rather than moral instruction or psychological depth.

The present study opens several *perspectives for further research*. Future study of paradox itself may benefit from the integration of linguistic, cognitive, and sociolinguistic approaches, which would deepen our understanding of how language destabilizes fixed moral categories and produces comic effect through semantic ambiguity and contextual redefinition. Wilde's paradoxical technique may also be examined within a broader comparative framework, juxtaposing *The Importance of Being Earnest* with other late Victorian and early modernist dramas. Such an approach would enable a more precise assessment of Wilde's position in the transition from Victorian to modern drama. Finally, further analysis of the performative potential of Wilde's paradoxes, particularly in relation to stage practice and reception, could illuminate the dynamic interaction between text, performance, and Victorian social ideology. Such studies would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Wilde's enduring influence on modern drama and theatrical language.

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