



UNIVERSIDAD DE JAÉN
Centro de Estudios de Postgrado

Master's Dissertation/
Trabajo Fin de Máster

**ANALYSIS OF THE USE OF
COMIC RESOURCES AS
FORMS OF SOCIAL CRITICISM
IN OSCAR WILDE'S *THE
IMPORTANCE OF BEING
EARNEST***

Student: Jurado Ruiz, Ángela

Tutor: Dr. López-Pelaez Casellas, Jesús

Dpt.: English Philology

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

ABSTRACT	1
1. INTRODUCTION	2
2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY	3
3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	4
3.1. Historical and Literary Background: Late Victorian Period.....	4
3.2. Linguistic Background: Theories of Meaning and Use.....	7
3.2.1. <i>Grice's Cooperative principle</i>	9
3.2.2 <i>Austin & Searle's Speech Act Theory</i>	9
3.3. Irony and Paradox.....	10
4. ANALYSIS OF THE USE OF COMIC RESOURCES AS FORMS OF SOCIAL CRITICISM IN OSCAR WILDE'S <i>THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST</i>	14
4.1. Verbal Irony.....	14
4.2. Situational Irony	16
4.3. Dramatic Irony	18
4.4. Logical Paradox	21
4.5. Literary Paradox	23
5. CONCLUSION.....	27
6. REFERENCES	30

ABSTRACT

This Master's thesis will examine Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). To that aim, it will firstly analyse the historical and literary background of the play, the Late Victorian period, in order to highlight the key features of the age. It will also reflect upon the linguistic theories of meaning and use relevant for an understanding of the play's comedic resources, namely: Grice's Cooperative principle and Austin & Searle's Speech Act Theory. Then, it will examine in some detail the philosophical and linguistic concepts of irony and paradox as literary devices, with the intention of clarifying their definitions and typologies. Finally, it will explore the use of these devices in the play, in order to understand how comic resources are also employed as forms of social criticism in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

KEYWORDS: Irony; Paradox; Oscar Wilde; The Importance of Being Earnest; Late Victorian Drama; Comic Resources; Social Criticism.

RESUMEN:

Este trabajo de fin de máster estudia la obra de Oscar Wilde *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Para ello, primero hemos analizado el contexto histórico y literario de la obra, el cual transcurre durante la época Victoriana, para poder así destacar las características clave del periodo. Este trabajo también reflexiona sobre las teorías lingüísticas de significado y uso relacionadas con la utilización de recursos cómicos, como son el Principio de Cooperación de Grice y la Teoría de los Actos de Habla de Austin y Searle. Además, este trabajo examina en detalle los recursos literarios y filosóficos de la ironía y la paradoja, para poder así distinguir sus definiciones y tipologías. Finalmente, se ha analizado el uso de estas herramientas en la obra, para comprender cómo los recursos cómicos han sido empleados en forma de crítica social en *The Importance of Being Earnest* de Oscar Wilde.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ironía, Paradoja; Oscar Wilde; The Importance of Being Earnest; Época Victoriana; Recursos cómicos; Crítica social.

1. INTRODUCTION

This master's thesis will analyse the use of comic resources as forms of social criticism in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest. A Serious Comedy for Trivial People*. (1895).

Firstly, I will describe the objectives and methodology followed. Then, I will examine the theoretical background of this research. To that aim, I will highlight the main features of the historical context, which is the Late Victorian period, such as Queen Victoria's reign, the system of Victorian social classes, and how manners and morals were the trademark of Victorianism. This historical context is very important to assess the use of humour as social criticism in the play. Moreover, I will point out the literary background as well, thus, I will revise new cultural movements such as Aestheticism and Utilitarianism. I will also include an overview of the most significant events of the author's life and a reflection on the key aspects of the play, like its genre. All these cultural facts are essential in order to understand the analysis of the play.

In addition, I will explore different linguistics theories of meaning and use in the theoretical background, such as Grice Cooperative's principle and Austin and Searle's Speech Act Theory. This section will provide the relationship of these two theories with the comic effect, since they are instrumental to understand how language usage produces humour. Furthermore, I will describe the linguistics and philosophical concepts of irony and paradox. They are necessary for the analysis of my master's thesis, since I explore their use as comic resources on the play.

Next, I will critically examine the play in some depth. This section will deal with the analysis of the comic resources as forms of social criticism. To that aim, I will examine the use of irony and paradox in the text of Oscar Wilde. I will divide the analysis into the different categories of each of these concepts. In each of this subsections, I will study several excerpts¹ from the play and I will discuss how the humorous effect is produced in them, as well as how it can be interpreted as critique of the values of Victorian society. Finally, I will discuss the results of my research in the conclusion, and I will also provide a section with all the references that I have employed to elaborate my Master's dissertation, following the conventions of 7th edition of the APA citation and format style.

¹ I will quote from the following edition of the play: Gairnor, J.E., Garner S. B. Jr., & Puchner, M. (Eds.). (2009). *The Norton Anthology of Drama*. (1st ed., Vol. 2, pp. 260-303). W. W. Norton and Company

2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The following section will expose the key features of this research, which are the objectives and methodology. They are necessary in order to understand the procedures followed when developing this dissertation.

To begin with, I will describe the objectives. This research involves two different types of objectives: general and specific. The general objective of my dissertation is to analyse Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. From my general objective, I create specific objectives, which help me to fulfil the main goal of my master's thesis. They are the following:

- To determine which linguistic devices are employed as comic resources in the play.
- To examine the text in depth, in order to decide representative excerpts to analyse.
- To critically assess the use of comic resources in the fragments of the play.
- To discuss how these comic resources are employed as forms of social criticism.

These are the goals set for this research. To achieve these goals this master's dissertation should follow a certain methodology. The first step in methodology is to define the type of research conducted. This is a philological work which combines elements of literary analysis, together with linguistics and philosophy, as this research is committed to the analysis of comic resources as forms of social criticism in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Regarding methodology, I would like to also provide a detailed structure of my master's thesis. Firstly, I discuss the state of the art: this dissertation revises scientific literature concerning relevant issues to develop the analysis. Those issues are the historical and literal context as well as the theories of meaning and use. In addition, I provide a detailed description of the definitions and typologies of the irony and paradox, since these are the linguistic and philosophical concepts that I examine in my analysis of the play.

This analysis is a detailed critical study of the certain representative excerpts of the text. These fragments illustrate the different types of irony and paradox present on the play. I also explain how they achieve a comic effect in the audience. Furthermore, I provide an interpretation of all these fragments, in order to acknowledge how the humorous effect can be understood as a form of social criticism in this play.

Finally, my master's thesis ends with a discussion of the results in the conclusion, as well as a section devoted to all the references that I have consulted and employed to elaborate my dissertation.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section will provide a theoretical background of the different relevant issues that are necessary to acknowledge in order to analyse the comic resources in Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest. A Serious Comedy for Trivial People*. To that aim, I will firstly examine the historical and literary background of the play. Thus, I will highlight the key features of the Late Victorian period, since Wilde's work was premiered in 1895.

In addition, I will also examine the linguistic theories of meaning and use relevant for an understanding of the play's humoristic effect. The main theories that this section will explore are Grice's Cooperative principle and Austin & Searle's Speech Act Theory. This background is necessary in order to understand the subsequent analysis of the play.

Finally, in the last part of this section, I will explain in depth what irony and paradox are. Definitions and typologies will be provided, since these are philosophical and linguistic concepts that are essential for the research, due to the fact that these resources are employed as literary devices to produce a humoristic effect, as well as to produce social criticism in the play.

3.1. Historical and Literary Background: Late Victorian Period

The literary movement of the Victorian period corresponds to the reign of Victoria, Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, which took place during the nineteenth century, from 1837 to 1901. In the context of literary production, this long and fruitful age is often divided into two different periods: The Early Victorian era, from 1832 to 1870, and the Late Victorian period, which includes writers who became prominent after 1870 (Rukhsana, 2018, p. 103). Oscar Wilde's comedy was first staged and published in 1895.

In order to understand the main features of this literary age, firstly, this section would reflect upon the historical background of Queen Victoria's reign. She was on the throne for sixty-four years, in which the country was transformed and experienced unmatched economic, social and political development (Adams, 2019, p. 2). Britain was the leading industrial, economic and military power in the nineteenth century. This situation originated more richness. In addition, trade and overseas commerce were an instrumental part of the economy in that period. These conditions favoured the British Empire, which was at its heyday. Moreover, the Industrial Revolution was happening in Britain at that time, which also brought economic prosperity to the country. (Evans, 2011, paras. 5-9) All these historical events provided the perfect environment for the growth of the cities as well as the expansion of the economy. These

facts produced the rise of the Victorian middle class. This social group shared certain values that defined their class, such as thrift, responsibility and self-reliance. They wanted to re-define society on merit rather than on aristocratic privilege (Loftus, 2011, para. 1). However, they were not alone. The Victorian era was a class-based society, and it was organized hierarchically, thus, there was also an upper class. This social group controlled politics and possessed wealth and lands. Moreover, Victorian social groups were also portrayed as an example of stereotypes and double standards that were truly reflected on their social manners (Steinbach, 2021, para. 3).

Manners and morals were the trademark of Victorian society. They believed in appearance, as well as in manners, even though to maintain them they had to flout morality. These virtues were the same ones that the bourgeois society had already exalted years before: self-control, self-help, self-reliance and self-discipline. Thus, Victorian morality was casted upon the individual citizen, and manners were a substitute for morals, as sometimes it was shown, for instance, by indulging into sexual irregularities such as extramarital relationships or homosexual relationships, but containing them in the public sphere (Himmelfarb, 1988, pp. 223, 224, 229, 231).

Consequently, Victorian social norms were concerned with hypocrisy. Some of the results of this society's farfetched conduct were literary products, such as the play under study, since Oscar Wilde produced a general critique towards Victorian society in his plays, especially in *The Important of Being Earnest* (Harvie & Matthew, 2000, p. 129), as it will be shown through this MA thesis.

In addition, the church also established morality at Victorian age, since there was a profound religious sense in the society of the time (Gardiner, 2002, p. 6). Morality and religion were linked together in this century. (Hinojosa, 2015, p. 71). Moreover, religious puritan morality even had an impact on legislation, since England criminalized homosexuality (Adut, 2005, p. 214). Therefore, two social spheres instilled morality during Victorian times: on the one hand, Victorian society, mainly the upper class, formed social standards, and on the other hand, the Church also established rules for morality (Lišková, 2012, p. 5)

Not only did historical and social changes happen during Victoria's reign, but also literary ones. Literature experienced a significant growth. There were many representative writers in the domains of fiction and poetry, however, this paper will focus on drama since I

analyse a play in my masters' dissertation. The most influential period for theatre was Late Victorian period, because there was a revival of English drama (Kardiansyah, 2017, p. 64).

This happened in the context of many new cultural movements. For instance, there was an opposition to the production of industry in relation to art, portrayed by John Ruskin, who claimed that machine work cancelled the beauty of art, in opposition to craftsmanship (Delhorme, 2020, p. 3). Ruskin's criticism on art and architecture, as well as his aesthetic concern, were quite influential on Oscar Wilde's work, since the latter attended Oxford, where they met. Wilde also encountered with Walter Pater at his time at Oxford (Riquelme, 2013, p. 125). Pater claimed the importance of experiencing art, not because of its usefulness, but as for its momentary value, its beauty (McGowan, 1990, p. 420). This was part of the aesthetic experience, since Pater was an advocate of Aestheticism. (Wolfreys, 2006, p. 17). This nineteenth century artistic trend was concerned with art for art's sake, which denoted "not merely a devotion to beauty, but a new conviction of the importance of beauty as compared with other values" (Johnson, 2017, p. 1).

Thus, Aestheticism was a response to the Victorian beliefs of usefulness (Güneş, Şentürk & Şentürk, 2021, p. 200). These beliefs were portrayed through the philosophy of Utilitarianism, which prescribed the principle of utility as the way of achieving happiness (Roach, 1999). This is opposed to the concept of Aestheticism, as it stands for the appreciation of beauty (Purchase, 2006, p. 37). This was quite influential on Oscar Wilde's writing style as well, as he was an advocate of Aestheticism (Güneş et al., 2021, p. 3), as he stated in the preface to his own novel "all art is quite useless" (Wilde, 2013, p. xiv).

In terms of Oscar Wilde's literary and historical background, it should be noted that he was a poet, novelist, essayist and playwright. Some of his most famous works are his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his essay *The Critic as Artist*, and his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which is the play I examine in this masters' dissertation. Wilde was born in 1854 in Dublin, where he started his studies at Trinity College. Then, he moved to Oxford to continue them there, where he met important and influential writers such as Ruskin and Pater, as it was mentioned above. (Shea, 2014, pp. 850-851). In 1895 Wilde sued for defamation his lover's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, who has libelled him of sodomite. This suit failed, and after that, Wilde faced two more trials, which involved the Crown's prosecution for committing acts of indecency with other men. (Bristow, 2015, p. 41). He was sentenced to imprisonment after these trials. After leaving prison, he died in exile in Paris in 1900. (Shea, 2014, p. 851).

Additionally, I would like to point out some features regarding the literary context of the play. First of all, this play belongs to the primary genre of comedy, as one of its main characteristics is that it has “a situation that initially affects the protagonist negatively and for which a solution must be found” (Nieto García, 1997, p. 30). This situation is developed in the first act (pp. 260 – 275) since Jack desired to marry Cecily, and he faced the opposition of her mother, Lady Bracknell, as Jack’s origins were unknown. This action is also accompanied of another feature of comedy, which is “the adequate use of language that is funny and full of jokes, double *entendres* and ambiguous situations in themselves” (Nieto García, 1997, p. 30). In this MA’s dissertation I will focus on those comic resources employed and I will interpret how they are used by Oscar Wilde as forms of social criticism. Moreover, this play also belongs to a secondary genre, such as comedy of manners, as it “exploits the living habits of a specific time and place” (Nieto García, 1997, p. 35). In particular, this play exposes the trivialities of Victorianism (Shabir, 2020, p. 80). Besides, it also belongs to the secondary genre of farce, as it shows stereotyped characters as well as looking for the laughter of the audience (Nieto García, 1997, p. 36).

Not only does the play belong to all these genres, but also it shows incipient features of the Theatre of the Absurd, as *The Importance of Being Earnest* deals with “profound unsettling of the most basic certainties of life and its uncoupling of language from any secure connection with meaning and knowledge of the disordered world in which we live” (Powell, 2013, p. 172). This play is a mockery of the ideals of earnest that Victorianism valued (Shabir, 2020, p. 88) and it achieves so by elevating all the Victorian conventions to the absurd with different comic resources, such as irony and paradox, with a double intention: on the one hand, the humour, and on the other, the social critique. This work will analyse those uses and evaluate them critically.

3.2. Linguistic Background: Theories of Meaning and Use

First of all, I will clarify some terms in order to develop this section properly. This MA’s dissertation will analyse different linguistic forms and functions. Consequently, it needs to examine under which theories it will do such processes.

To begin with, this research will study a canonical literary text, Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Beaugrande (1981, p. 3) defined text as “the communicative occurrence which meets seven standards of textuality”. These criteria are cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality and intertextuality (Beaugrande, 1981, p. 11). In this research the criterion of intentionality is especially relevant, since it is related to

the intentions of the addresser of the message and this MA's dissertation studies the use of comic resources with the purpose of social criticism. Additionally, it should be noted that I will follow Jakobson's terminology of factors of communication in my work (1987, pp. 66).

Moreover, I would like to clarify as well why a literary text may be subjected to the same kind of analysis than other non-literary text. According to Fabb (2008, p. 1135) "linguistics can offer to literary studies an understanding of form, and the ways by which a text is used to communicate meaning". Thus, I will need to employ linguistic knowledge in order to fully understand the meaning of the play that I will analyse.

In addition, it should be noted that texts can be used in certain ways and fulfil specific functions, and when they do so, they are considered as discourse. As Ross (2005, p. 41) suggested, discourse "is used to describe the rules and conventions underlying the use of language in extended stretches of written and spoken text". Therefore, since I examine the specific function of a text, namely how certain linguistic devices are employed to achieve a comic effect, discourse should be analysed.

According to Brown & George (1983, p. 1) "the analysis of discourse is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use". Thus, the linguistic analysis of this MA thesis is concerned with contextual considerations, therefore, the area of language study would be pragmatics, which is "the relations of signs to interpreters" (Brown & George, 1983, p. 26), or as Ross puts it "the ways that sentences acquire meanings in contexts" (2005, p. 38).

Furthermore, in order to understand the analysis that I provide, the relationship between the literary text of the play and its potential readers should be explained. To that aim, I include the definition of pragmatic concepts like reference, presupposition, inference and implicature. I followed Brown & George terminology to define them (1983, pp. 28- 33):

- Reference: relationship between signifier and signified [following the terminology of Saussure (1916)]. However, it should be noted that this process occurs because of an action of the addresser, not as a consequence of the message itself.
- Presupposition: general knowledge that the addressee of the text share with the addresser.
- Inference: deduction of the suggested meaning implied by the addresser of the message.
- Implicature: suggestions or meanings different from the literal addresser's message.

3.2.1. *Grice's Cooperative principle*

There is a special type of implicature that linguists identify as conversational implicature, which is concerned with the conventions that the addresser of the message obeys when communicating. These premises are a series of maxims proposed by Grice, which are quantity, quality, relation and manner. Quantity is concerned with making the message as informative as possible, quality is related with being truthful, relation means being relevant, and manner implies avoiding ambiguity. These four maxims together constitute Grice's Cooperative Principle (Brown & George, 1983, pp. 31-2). This proposition intends to make communication successful and avoid misunderstandings in the interaction and interpretation of the message.

However, when the addresser disregards any of the Cooperative Principle maxims, it adds a new meaning to the literal message, which is a conversational implicature (Brown & George, 1983, p. 32). This is relevant because one of the new additional meanings that a conversational implicature can produce is humour. For instance, when flouting the maxim of manner, the addresser adds ambiguity to the message, and ambiguity can be used as a language device to create a comic effect (Charina, 2017, p. 121). With reference to this, Taghiyev (2017, p. 285) suggested that ambiguity "can be considered the most productive source of linguistic jokes". Consequently, humour is achieved when violating the Cooperative Principle maxim of manner. As Ross (2005, p. 8) explained, to produce humour, the message needs some elements such as a conflict between expectation and reality, ambiguity, which causes the conflict, and a resolution of the conflict, provided by the interpretation of the message. Thus, the reader should interpret the message to understand the comic effect. With relation to this, it should be noted that context is essential for humour, as it was mentioned on the first part of this section; therefore, knowledge of historical context helps the reader understand how the ambiguity is produced, as Ross (2005, p. 50) suggested "to perceive the contradiction, the reader also needs non-linguistic knowledge about the society".

3.2.2 *Austin & Searle's Speech Act Theory*

Austin proposed a new system of meaning analysis related with linguistic conventions, which considered the addresser's situation as well as their intentions. Thereupon, meaning was portrayed by the concept of 'acts': when uttering a sentence, that is, using linguistic conventions, the addresser performed a linguistic act with a certain intention (Oishi, 2006, p. 1). This approach was known as the Speech Act Theory, and it was first developed by Austin

in 1962. Its origins can be found in the acknowledgement that the utterance of sentences can be considered as equivalent to the performance of an act (Brown & George, 1983, p. 231).

There are three types of speech acts: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. Locutionary are acts of speech, whereas illocutionary acts are done through speech, in opposition to perlocutionary acts which are performed by speech. The distinction between the three acts is bigger than a preposition. However, it is a good way to illustrate the difference: locutionary acts are acts of speech because they are concerned with the construction and pronunciation of the utterance, while illocutionary acts are done in speaking since they are concerned with the intention or purpose of the addresser of the message. Finally, the reason why perlocutionary acts are performed by speaking, is that they consist on the effects achieved by the utterance, that is, the consequence (Sadock, 2004, p. 54).

In relation to this, there are two other important concepts: sense and force. For Austin, sense is equivalent of meaning, whereas force is concerned with reference. (Thomas, 1996, p. 360). These two terms are related with the speech acts as well: Austin said that there is a illocutionary force of the utterance in opposition to the locutionary sense (Sadock, 2004, p. 55). As a consequence of this, “there are possibilities for ambiguity of meaning when there is a gap between the sense and force of the utterance” (Ross, 2005, p. 39). Therefore, the comic affect can be achieved by the existence of ambiguity, and as I explained above, ambiguity can be the source of humour (Charina, 2017, p. 121).

3.3. Irony and Paradox

To begin with, this section will deal with the origins of irony and paradox. They are ancient philosophical terms. For instance, irony can be traced back to its Greek origin, since one of its earliest examples is the Socratic Irony. Socrates employed irony as a way to clarify the inconsistencies in the arguments of a given topic by asking questions which he affirmed that he knew nothing about (Keller, 2004, para. 1). Paradox, can be found in early stages of philosophy as well, as it was considered by the Greeks as the oldest philosophical question with no answer (Sorensen, 2003, p. 3). These two philosophical terms evolved to these days, for example, irony developed its actual meaning of contradiction from medieval times onwards, and it started to be widely used in literary from the eighteenth century (Keller, 2004, para. 1). In the case of paradox, it was on medieval times as well with Augustine’s pragmatic paradoxes, when the current meaning of contradictory sentences was instituted (Sorensen, 2003, p. 162).

Moreover, this section will also deal with the concept of tropes, since irony is a trope (Wilson & Sperber, 1992, p. 54) as well as paradox (Kelen, 2007, p. 29). Tropes are “figures that require the readers to reinterpret the original message” (Burgers, Van Mulkern & Schellens, 2012, p. 295). Thus, tropes are ways of using language creatively to express a non-literal meaning present on a given text. This ‘non-literal meaning’ which tropes aim to achieve is connected with the existence of ambiguity, which was mentioned in previous sections, especially when dealing with Grice’s Cooperative Principle as well as with Austin & Searle’s Speech Act Theory.

Irony is defined as a literary device (Literary Devices Editors, 2022a, para. 1), which offers the opposite meaning of what is being literally said (Kelen, 2007, p. 30). Therefore, irony has two levels of meaning: face value and real meaning. Face value is concerned with the appearance, that is, the literal meaning, whereas the real meaning is related with reality, since it is the encoded message (Keller, 2004, para. 1). These contradictory elements form an ironic statement. To illustrate this point, in the ironic statement “this is a very good idea!”, the face value would be that ‘it is a brilliant idea’, whereas the real meaning intended in this sentence could be that the idea was really poor.

In addition, it should be noted that irony is composed of factors and markers. Irony factors are characteristics of the ironic statement, whereas irony markers are linguistic clues to help the addresser to understand the irony. Moreover, irony factors are essential to an ironic utterance in opposition to irony markers, which can be deleted from irony (Burgers et al., 2012, p. 292). For instance, in the previous example of ironic statement, ‘this is a very good idea!’, the irony factors would be the sentence ‘this is a good idea’, and the irony markers would be the intensifier ‘very’ as well as the quotation mark. The ironic utterance still can be understood when the irony markers are removed, however, it is impossible to grasp the meaning if the irony factors are deleted.

Furthermore, the theory of irony says that for an utterance to be ironical, it should fulfil certain criteria, such as being contextually inappropriate. This inappropriateness should be intentional as well as relevant, since the addresser pretends that the addressee recognizes it. (Attardo, 2000, pp. 3-4). This is related as well with the ambiguity that is generated because of the contradictory elements that compose an ironic statement, since the purpose of irony is to express certain feeling or attitude (Grice, 1989, p. 54). The result of this can be to achieve

different communicative aims such as creating a comic effect or even implying a social criticism (Burgers et al., 2012, p. 290-291).

Finally, it is important to highlight that there are three different types of irony. For instance, verbal irony deals with the contradictory meanings found in speech (LiteraryDevices Editors, 2022d, para. 1); whereas situational irony is related with contradictory circumstances, that is, the contradictory meaning that an event can have (LiteraryDevices Editors, 2022c, para. 1). The last type of irony, which is dramatic irony, relies on the gap between what the audience is aware of and the characters are not. It highlights the contradiction between the action on stage versus the reality that characters will have to face eventually (Literary Terms, 2015a, para. 1).

Therefore, the difference between these three kinds of ironies relies on what the object of the irony is; whether the irony can be found in speech, as in verbal ironies; or if it is found in an unexpected outcome, such as in situational ironies; or even if the irony relies on the gap of knowledge between audience and characters, as happens in dramatic ironies.

Paradox is the other trope and philosophical term that I will analyse in this section. It is defined as a contradiction, which consists of two opposites mutually exclusive and interdependent, because they define each other (Gylfe, Henrika & Vaara, 2019, p. 68). Thus, paradox involves self-contradictory statements (Kelen, 2007, p. 29). For instance, to illustrate this trope, let's consider the sentence 'this statement is a lie'. This example is self-contradictory, because if it is true, it cannot be a lie, then it is not true. Consequently, there is a contradiction in the statement, which is consider a paradox.

This disagreement of ideas provokes that the addressee finds a new layer of meaning, because of the ambiguity that is created through the use of a paradox. However, it should be distinguished from an oxymoron, which is another trope that consists on a contradiction as well. Nevertheless, they are different because of their length: an oxymoron is a combination of two words whereas a paradox is made up of a phrases or even a sentence (Kelen, 2007, p. 30).

There are different kinds of paradox, such as logical and literary paradoxes. The first type expresses the failure of logical reasoning (LiteraryDevices Editors, 2022b, para. 18), as it can be seen in the previous example, 'this statement is a lie' is a self-contradictory utterance that defies logic. On the other hand, the latter type conceives more profound ideas, normally related with art. It is a device that art employs to imitate life. It deals with profound truths which are self-contradictory (Literary Devices Editors, 2022b, para. 18). For instance, when characters explain their contradictory vision on a given matter, there is a literary paradox. Thus, the

difference between logical paradoxes and literary paradoxes is that the first ones are concerned with logic; whereas the latter are related with art and profound truths. (Literary Devices Editors, 2022b).

The purpose of paradox is to provide a contradiction that makes the addressee rethink their reality. (Kelen, 2007, p. 29). This self-contradiction can create a link with humour, and therefore, a comic effect can be produced (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2016, p. 457). Moreover, in the case of the Wilde's use of paradox, it should be noted that he "takes the common-sense, apparently natural order of things (the doxa) and reverses it, goes against it (para) in a way that seems initially wittily absurd, but which comes to make a certain sense upon reflection" (Wolfreys, 2006, p. 19).

Finally, to conclude this section, I would like to highlight the difference between irony and paradox. They might seem similar since they both achieve a comic result on language due to the ambiguity they create. Even though they both deal with contradiction, they do so in different ways. Irony offers a contradiction that should be inferred by the addressee by violating Grice's maxims, since the message is not as informative as possible, it is not truthful and/or it is ambiguous. Thus, maxims of quantity, quality and manner are flouted when using irony. However, paradox, portrays a contradiction as well, but it is more informative, since in a paradoxical statements the two opposites are exposed, therefore, the maxim of quantity is not violated when using paradoxes, since it is more informative than irony. Nevertheless, paradoxes flout the maxims of manner as well since they produce ambiguity.

Even though they achieve it in different ways, both irony and paradox produce ambiguity. As mentioned earlier, this ambiguity produces a gap between sense and force in the utterances, therefore, irony and paradox produce humour. They both achieve a comic effect on the addressee. Nevertheless, this effect could not be produced if the addressee is not aware of the context for both irony and paradox, since it is quite relevant to understand them. Consequently, awareness of historical context is essential for irony and paradox to produce a humorous effect on the addressee. Moreover, this comic effect can also be interpreted as a way of social criticism. Thus, in the following sections, I will analyse particular examples of how Oscar Wilde used irony and paradox in his comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest*, as comic resources, and then I will explore how these elements also conveyed social criticism in his play.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE USE OF COMIC RESOURCES IN OSCAR WILDE'S *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*

4.1. Verbal Irony

This type of irony deals with speech. It is concerned with the contradictory meanings that a speaker conveys. (LiteraryDevices Editors, 2022d, para. 1). In the case of this play, instead of dealing with speakers, there are characters, and they are the ones that speak in a contradictory way in certain situations, when they intend to say the opposite of what they actually utter.

Verbal irony achieves a comic effect because it creates language ambiguity by portraying contradictory meanings in the utterance, and this is one way of producing a humorous effect (Ross, 2005, p. 8). This type of irony accomplishes this ambiguity by flouting Grice's maxim of manner (Brown & George, 1983, p. 32). Likewise, verbal irony also violates the maxim of quantity, as it does not provide extra information on why the utterance is contradictory, and consequently the audience has to infer that. Therefore, verbal irony is not as informative as it could be (Brown & George, 1983, p. 32) and it disregards this maxim. In addition, verbal ironies also made humour possible by producing a gap between sense and force of the utterance (Ross, 2005, p. 39), because the irony entails an additional meaning and, thus, the sense is not literal and the result is ambiguous.

There are several examples of verbal ironies in the play. For instance, "I hope you will always look at me just like that, especially when there are other people present." (Act 1, page 269). Gwendolen said this in a moment of intimacy with Jack, instantly after he proposed to her; therefore, it is ironic because she implied that Jack should always look at her in this personal and private way, especially when they were surrounded by people. This is a mockery of the value of appearances in Victorian society as "appearance and respectability were above everything else in Victorian society" (Güneş, et al., 2021, p. 201). Thus, for Gwendolen it is more important the way Jack looked at her than the actual fact of looking at her.

Furthermore, I found another verbal irony that mocks Victorian value on appearances in:

"MERRIMAN: Yes, sir. Three portmanteaus, a dressing-case, two hat-boxes, and a large luncheon-basket.

ALGERNON: I am afraid I can't stay more than a week this time." (Act 2, page 282).

I consider this utterance ironic because of the amount of clothes that Algernon brought. That many clothes would predict a longer stay; however, Algernon claimed that it was merely for a

week. The reason why is that he needed multiple clothes to change, since “people were judged by their wardrobe” (Shabir, 2020, p. 81) in Victorian upper class. Thus, Oscar Wilde mocks this upper class concern on appearances, which was typical of Victorianism (Shabir, 2020, p. 81) by portraying its ironic side with Algernon’s wardrobe.

With reference to appearances, there is another verbal irony:

“GWENDOLEN: But we will not be the first to speak.

CECILY: Certainly not.

GWENDOLEN: Mr. Worthing, I have something very particular to ask you. Much depends on your reply.” (Act 3, page 293).

This statement is ironic because Gwendolen did the opposite of what she agreed on seconds before: she was the first one to talk to Jack. Therefore, she said so since she was worried about appearances, even though she finally behaved differently.

Another example of verbal irony is: “Now to minor matters. Are your parents living?” (Act 1, page 270). This is said by Lady Bracknell. It is ironic that Jack’s relatives are considered a minor issue, especially in the context of this conversation, because Lady Bracknell asked Jack about other matters, such as smoking, that were actually minor in comparison to having a family. Oscar Wilde also criticizes appearance here, with Lady Bracknell, because with her questions she highlighted that she considered more important appearances than Jack’s personality (Shabir, 2020, p.87).

Wilde also mocked how triviality was overvalued in Victorian England (Shabir, 2020, p. 80). He used verbal ironies such as “Might I have a buttonhole first? I never have any appetite unless I have a buttonhole first.” (Act 2, page 279). This was Algernon’s petition to Cecily before eating together, and I consider this is ironic because it is not necessary to have a flower in your clothes in order to be hungry. Oscar Wilde use this verbal irony to portray and mock Victorian dining customs (Shabir, 2020, p. 84)

Oscar Wilde also used verbal ironies to mock Victorian conventions over marriage. For example, in this statement: “You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter (...) to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel?” (Act 1, page 271). Lady Bracknell said this to Jack ironically since she is referring to Jack’s unknown origin, as he was abandoned in a railway station. Therefore, Lady Bracknell considered him as a ‘parcel’ and she did not believe his marriage proposal to her daughter

suitable. This is a critique of Victorian society as well because “people marry for money and titles and love is not a necessary factor” (Nayar, 2009, p. 290). Therefore, Jack’s interest on Gwendolen is not enough for Lady Bracknell as he had no family to endorse him socially.

In addition, in the utterance “The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man.” (Act 2, page 287) there is a verbal irony. This was said by Gwendolen when she is explaining who her father is; I consider it ironic because in the society of her time the proper domain for the men was not the private sphere but the public one. This verbal irony criticizes the female submissiveness of Victorian society (Jordan, 1970, p. 103). Wilde mocked this platitude by offering the opposite view on the matter with Gwendolen’s statement, as its play was “a product of the age of the New Woman” (Jordan, 1970, p. 103).

4.2. Situational Irony

Situational ironies deal with contradictory outcomes in certain circumstances. (LiteraryDevices Editors, 2022c, para. 1). In the case of this play, situational irony happens when an event occurs differently of what it was expected. Therefore, this event or situation has a contradictory meaning and it is ambiguous.

This kind of irony creates a comic effect because it generates ambiguity. As I pointed out in the case of verbal ironies, ambiguity can produce a comic effect, since it is one of the most productive sources of jokes in language (Taghiyev, 2017, p. 285). This type of irony achieves a humourous effect as well by flouting Grice’s maxims. Verbal ironies disregard the maxim of manner; therefore, they add new meanings to the utterance by producing a conversational implicature (Brown & George, 1983, p. 32). Furthermore, these type of ironies also develop a gap between the sense and the force of the utterance and thus, produce humour (Ross, 2005, p. 39) because they imply a contradictory outcome that the audience will find out and consider funny.

There are several example of situational ironies in the play. For instance, when Gwendolen told Jack that:

“We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals (...) and my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you.” (Act 1, page 267-8).

In that moment both the audience and Jack thought this was not true; however, by the end of the play, it ended up becoming so. Therefore, this is a situational irony. This is also a critique on the value of appearances in Victorian society, as for Gwendolen the most important requisite for her future husband is her name.

With reference to this, there is another example of situational irony: “Where is your brother Ernest? We are both engaged to be married to your brother Ernest, so it is a matter of some importance to us to know where your brother Ernest is at present.” (Act 2, page 291). This is what Gwendolen told Jack and Algernon on behalf of Cecily and herself. This is ironic because they wanted to marry the men that they have in front of them; however, they asked about someone named Ernest, as it is neither of them. This is another example of how appearance is the most important issue for them. Oscar Wilde used this situational irony to mock it as Victorians “emphasised the triviality and the superficiality of things” (Güneş, et al., 2021, p. 205).

Moreover, there is another example of a situational irony:

“ALGERNON: (...) I love you, Cecily. You will marry me, won't you?

CECILY: You silly boy! Of course Why, we have been engaged for the last three months.” (Act 2, page 284).

This is ironic because they haven't even met until this encounter; however, for Cecily, they have been engaged for three months. In addition, they actually become engaged moments after this utterance; thus, I consider this a situational irony; especially, because for Algernon and the audience, it was quite unexpected that they were already engaged. The social criticism here is related with the vision of art as well, as Oscar Wilde believed that life imitate art (Güneş, et al., 2021, p. 201). Therefore, when the reality in the play mirrored Cecily's diary, he achieved that effect.

Another example of situational irony can be found in the second act, when Gwendolen arrived at the Garden at the Manor House, where she met Cecily. After they introduced each other, Miss Fairfax exclaimed: “I like you already more than I can say. My first impressions of people are never wrong” (Act II, page 286). This statement is a situational irony since, as the play continued, the audience discovered that this was not true, as they quarrelled over who was Mr Ernest Worthing's fiancée. In addition, Gwendolen even confirmed the irony in latter pages, when she pointed out that: “From the moment I saw you I distrusted you. I felt that you were

false and deceitful. I am never deceived in such matters. My first impressions of people are invariable right.” (Act II, page 290). Her invariability was actually quite unpredictable, as she changed her mind on Cecily’s first opinion quite promptly. This is also social criticism as Oscar Wilde here reflects on the hypocrisy of people in order to maintain decorum in meetings (Shabir, 2020, p. 87).

Finally, I would like to point out that the plot of the play at large can also be considered a situational irony, because the lies that both male characters said became truth: Jack’s real name was actually Ernest, and Algernon was indeed his brother. These unexpected outcomes are also a form of social criticism, as “in pursuit of someone named Earnest, the play draws striking parallels between what is right and what was considered right” (Shabir, 2020, p. 88).

4.3. Dramatic Irony

Dramatic ironies rely on the gap of knowledge between the audience and (some of) the characters. These types of ironies offer contradictory information, as the characters are unaware of certain events, even though the audience do acknowledge them. (Literary Terms, 2015a, para. 1). In the case of this play, it can be observed in certain scenes, when there is an informational difference between what the audience knows and what the characters are aware of. This gap produces a humorous situation because the play I analyse in this MA’s dissertation is a comedy. Dramatic ironies can be found in different genres with a variety of effects. For instance, in plays from other genres like Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, Homer’s *Odyssey* or Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, the effect of dramatic irony is totally different, as it is concerned with suspense and different perspectives on events (Goldie, 2017, p. 72).

However, dramatic irony, in the case of *The Importance of Being Earnest* provides a comic effect, since it portrays new meanings to the scene. The consequence is that the utterance acquires an additional meaning, which can be explained according to the Speech Acts Theory, as humour is produced when this gap between sense and force happens (Ross, 2005, p. 39). Moreover, dramatic irony flouts Grice maxim of manner, which also conveys humour by adding ambiguity to the scene (Charina, 2017, p. 121).

For example, when Lady Bracknell went to visit his nephew, he couldn’t offer her cucumber sandwiches because Jack had already eaten them all moments before. However, in the scene, Lane, Algernon’s butler, said to him:

“LANE: There were no cucumbers in the market this morning, sir. I went down twice.

ALGERNON: No cucumbers!

LANE: No, sir. Not even for ready money.” (Act 1, page 266)

The audience knows the truth: there were cucumbers before Jack ate them, thus, this is a dramatic irony. This can be interpreted as well as a form of criticism on Victorian dining customs (Shabir, 2020, p. 84) as it appears that Lady Bracknell can exclusively eat those sandwiches, even though there is more food available at Algernon’s flat. The real reason is that Victorian upper classes had etiquettes of eating, which assured them to maintain distance from lower classes (Shabir, 2020, p. 82). Oscar Wilde highlighted the irony of this fact.

Likewise, in this scene, Algernon also said: “I have just had a telegram to say that my poor friend Bunbury is very ill again” (Act I, page 266). Lady Bracknell, ignored the fact that Bunbury was a product of Algernon’s mind. However, the audience was aware of it, since in earlier pages Algernon had explained to Jack how he was a ‘Bunburyist’, and that this person did not exist; it was merely a trick he employed, Bunbury was an excuse to be able to behave as he pleased, regarding his social life. This is also a social critique, as Bunburying is the term that Oscar Wilde created to illustrate how Victorian lifestyle indulged to avoid certain circumstances in order to act as desired, instead of what is expected according to appearances (Güneş, et al., 2021, p. 202).

This role of Bunburying is performed by Algernon successfully. For instance, later on, when he visited Jack’s house in the country, there is another situational irony: “You are my little cousin Cecily, I’m sure.” (Act 2, page 277) The audience knows that she is not his relative and that it was a scheme to practice his Bunburying. However, Cecily ignores that fact and believed Algernon as Jack’s brother, therefore, his uncle Ernest. Hence, I believe this is a dramatic irony, because of that gap of knowledge between Cecily and the audience. Moreover, it is also a form of social criticism, as Algernon escapes from Victorian convention with this trick (Reinert, 1956, p. 16).

Additionally, the excuses that Algernon provides are even respectable, as he always looks favourable for helping his poor friend Bunbury (Reinert, 1956, p. 17). He even used those excuses when he met Cecily, as she said:

“Ernest has just been telling me about his poor invalid friend Mr. Bunbury whom he goes to visit so often. And surely there must be much good in one who is kind to an invalid, and leaves the pleasures of London to sit by a bed of pain.” (Act 2, page 282).

Here, Cecily ignored the fact that Bunbury is a made up person who Algernon invented. However, the audience is aware of that, therefore it is a dramatic irony. This is also a scheme of Algernon to look better, thus, it can be considered a critique on the importance of social appearance as well.

With reference to this value of appearances, there is another relevant instance of dramatic irony in the play worth mentioning: “I must see him at once on a most important christening—I mean on most important business.” (Act 2, page 286). Here Algernon asked Cecily about the minister of her parish, and he is informing her about his request. However, he let some information slip, as he said that he wanted to get christened. The audience is aware that he actually meant that, since he needs to change his name to Ernest, as his real name is Algernon. However, Cecily ignores all this. This is again related with the importance of being Ernest, as he needs that name in order to be able to marry her, because trivial things such as names were considered serious in this over-civilized society (Reinert, 1956, p.18).

Furthermore, as the action in the play is concerned with ways of non being earnest, Bunburying has a central role (Reinert, 1956, p. 17). Consequently, when Jack arrived at his house he is warned about someone who is already there: “Your brother Ernest. He arrived about half an hour ago” (Act 2, page 281). He is surprised by this fact, since his brother is actually his own invention, as he showed: “My brother is in the dining-room? I don’t know what it all means. I think it is perfectly absurd.” (Act 2, page 281). However, the audience knew the truth: Algernon was the one who had arrived and he was impersonating his brother Ernest. Thus, this scene is also a dramatic irony. Moreover, it is also a social critique, as they both, Jack and Algernon, tried to escape the hypocrisy of convention, however, they became hypocrites themselves as they pretended to be someone else (Reinert, 1956, p. 16). Even Jack realized that, when he met Algernon practicing Bunburying at his own house: “Nothing will induce me to take his hand. I think his coming down here disgraceful. He knows perfectly well why.” (Act 2, page 282). This is also a dramatic irony, as only the audience and these two characters know the real reason, but Cecily and Miss Prim are left in the dark.

With reference to this, Bunbury as part of a dramatic irony appears again, when Lady Bracknell arrived at Manor House in the third act. There, she asked about him, to which Algernon replied: “Oh! No! Bunbury doesn’t live here. Bunbury is somewhere else at present. In fact, Bunbury is dead. (...) Oh! I killed Bunbury this afternoon. I mean poor Bunbury died

this afternoon.” (Act 3, page 295). The audience is aware of the truth again even though Lady Bracknell ignores it.

4.4. Logical Paradox

Logical paradoxes are evidently concerned with logic. They express a self-contradictory statement that defies logical reasoning (LiteraryDevices Editors, 2022b, para. 18). They prove that human logic fails by conveying contradictory statements in the same utterance (Literary Terms, 2015b, para. 12). The examples that I will examine from this play portray this contradiction: they show utterances where the statements of the characters are contradictory because they are illogical. They can be considered logical fallacies, as they are “erroneous argument dependent upon illogical contention” (Literary Devices Editors, 2022e, para. 1)

This type of paradoxes generates a comic effect. Logical paradoxes do so by creating a conflict of meaning between expectation and reality (Ross, 2005, p. 8). This conflict produces ambiguity, and that violates Grice’s maxim of manner (Brown & George, 1983, pp. 32). Therefore, the ambiguity that logical paradoxes produce can be a source of humour (Charina, 2017, p. 121).

The first example of logical paradox in this play is in the subtitle, which is *A Serious Comedy for Trivial People*. These words are paradoxical because they foreshadow the contradiction that the audience will face on the play, as Wilde integrated seriousness and playfulness in his work (Breuer, 1993, p. 233). Moreover, the subtitle explains what the play is about: the seriousness that Victorian society dealt with the trivialities of life. Oscar Wilde’s play criticizes Victorian lifestyle; however, this is also paradoxical, because the play was a huge success and it was truly appreciated by Victorian society (Güneş, et al., 2021, p. 199).

There are some other examples of logical paradoxes in the play, for instance:

“ALGERNON: What brings you up to town?

JACK: Oh pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere?” (Act 1, page 261).

Jack told this to Algernon and it is paradoxical because the expected answer would be business, not pleasure. Later on the scene, as Algernon discovered the real reason of his journey, to propose to Gwendolen, he stated it as well: “I thought you had come up for pleasure? . . . I call that business.” (Act 1, page 261). This is also a form of criticism as people got marriage during Victorian times searching for titles and money, and not because of love (Nayar, 2009, p. 290).

Likewise, Lady Bracknell also produced another logical paradox later on that scene, when requesting information about Jack's relatives:

"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." (Act 1, page 271).

This is paradoxical as no one can *produce* their own parents. It defies logical reasoning to acquire relatives, as if they were commodities that you can purchase. This is also a critique on marriage policy during Victorianism, as "class dictates and defines identity and social relationships" (Nayar, 2009, p 290), and due to the fact that Jack had no parents he was not a suitable match for Gwendolen.

More examples of logical paradoxes can be found, such as: "it is simply a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication." (Act 2, page 284). Cecily implies that her diary is something trivial, and at the same time, she also suggested that it is supposedly meant for publication, which is contradictory. This is again a critique on Victorian concern on trivial things in spite of serious matters (Reinert, 1965, p. 17).

Furthermore, Cecily asked Algernon about his hair, and he replied with a logical paradox:

"CECILY: (...) I hope your hair curls naturally, does it?"

ALGERNON: Yes, darling, with a little help from others." (Act 2, page 285).

Hair cannot be naturally curled and at the same time with assistance; therefore, these statements are self-contradictory and defy human reasoning; since it has to be either one or the other option, but not both at the same time. It is also a critique on appearances as well, as Algernon's hair cannot be in his natural way, it has to be arranged artificially, as society dictates the correct style.

Similarly, Algernon stated that he hated tea-cake and at the same time he wished that it was available: "I wish you would have tea-cake instead. I don't like tea-cake." (Act 2, page 292). This is contradictory, because if he dislikes something he should not desire it at the same time. This can be linked as well to the social critique on Victorian dining habits that I explained above.

In addition, Lady Bracknell also produced a logical paradox: “He has nothing, but he looks everything.” (Act 3, page 297). She implied that his nephew possesses no fortune, even though he looks like if he had it all. Consequently, these two statements are contradictory, as not having and having everything cannot occur simultaneously. Nevertheless, they are truthful, as for Victorianism appearances were everything (Güneş, et al., 2021, p. 201); thus, this is also a form of social criticism.

Lady Bracknell provided another logical paradox:

“LADY BRACKNELL: (...) Is this Miss Prism a female of repellent aspect, remotely connected with education?

CHASUBLE: She is the most cultivated of ladies, and the very picture of respectability.

LADY BRACKNELL: It is obviously the same person.” (Act 3, page 299).

The descriptions that Lady Bracknell and Chasuble gave were totally different. Nevertheless, she suggested that it is definitely the same person; thus, this is self-contradictory because they affirmed totally opposite qualities about Miss Prim. Their views were biased: Lady Bracknell belonged to upper class, therefore she commented on Miss Prim according to that canon based on the cult of appearances (Güneş et al, 2021, p. 201) whereas Chasuble was a priest and he could be marginal to that faith on appearances.

Furthermore, there is another example on: “The suspense is terrible. I hope it will last.” (Act III, page 301). Here, Gwendolen suggested that the feeling of suspense was dreadful, however, she wished for it to continue. This is contradictory, since if a circumstance, such as suspense, is negative, normally it would be desirable that it will not last. Consequently, it was not logical to expect it to be persistent over time. This paradoxical statement seems to be a form of social criticism, as it highlights that Gwendolen principles were paradoxical, since she is part of the Victorian upper class and they considered the serious trivial, and the trivial serious (Reinert, 1965, p. 17).

4.5. Literary Paradox

Literary paradoxes are concerned with profound ideas, which are portrayed by self-contradictory statements (Literary Devices Editors, 2022b, para. 25). These profound truths are statements which are logic even though they are paradoxical. For instance, there is an example from Hamlet that illustrates this: “I must be cruel only to be kind”. There is a level of logic in his statement, as “the murder of a murderer requires cruelty for kindness” (Literary Devices

Editors, 2022b, para. 12). This type of paradoxes help art imitate life (Literary Terms, 2015b). In this play I will examine some quotations in which the characters are self-contradictory, because they depict their ideas on profound matters, such as their visions on marriage or education, however, they are not illogical, as it happened with the logical paradoxes examples.

This kind of paradox produces humour as well. Literary paradoxes create a comic effect because they provide a contradictory message that results on a conflict between what the audience expected and what is the reality for the characters. This results on a humorous effect (Ross, 2005, p. 8). In addition, as I have explained before, this conflict is the cause of ambiguity, because it violates Grice's maxim of manner (Brown & George, 1983, pp. 32). Therefore, literary paradoxes become comical as well because of the ambiguity produced (Charina, 2017, p. 121).

There is a plethora of examples of literary paradoxes in the play, for instance: "If the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility" (Act 1, page 261). Here Algernon described a different class structure as it was established in the Victorian age: the upper class was the example for the town, not the lower one. This is also a form of social criticism as Algernon is being paradoxical because the class that should be the example is busy focusing on trivial things, (Reinert, 1965, p. 17) as it happened with Victorian elite.

Regarding social classes, Lady Bracknell provided another literary paradox concerning this: "Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone" (Act 1, page 269). This is paradoxical because the absence of knowledge should not be considered as a virtue. Nevertheless, she considered the lack of education a positive quality, especially for lower classes, as she suggested: "Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effects whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes" (Act 1, page 269). This is a critique on the vision of education in Victorian upper classes, as they celebrated ignorance, because they feared education on lower classes, as it could jeopardize their social status. (Shabir, 2020, p. 85).

Another example of literary paradox can be found in: "Divorces are made in Heaven" (Act 1, page 262). Algernon expressed his opinion on this matter as if it was a profound truth. Additionally, this is paradoxical, as divorces are supposedly a bad thing, and in heaven what happens are good things; therefore, he is implying that divorces are a blessing, instead of a punishment. This is a critique on marriage as well, since divorces were a blessing because

marriages were a business in that society, since parents arranged everything (Güneş, et al., p. 202) Wilde criticized those arrangements by praising how welcomed divorces were, as if they were a blessing made in heaven.

Additionally, Algernon offered another literary paradox concerning marriage: “Girls never marry the man they flirt with.” (Act I, page 262). He explained that women’s behaviour is contradictory: even though they might seem that the intention of someone by flirting is to end up getting married, as they are showing amorous interest in that way, he underlined how the opposite was what actually happened. This is also related with marriage arrangements, as girls were not able to decide for themselves in the Victorian age (Güneş, et al., p. 202).

In relation to that, there is another example of a literary paradox concerning the topic of arranged marriages, such as Lady Bracknell’s quote: “To speak frankly, I am not in favour of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other’s character before marriage, which I think is never advisable.” (Act 3, page 297). This is self-contradictory because knowing your partner to get married should be recommended not warned against it. However, this was truth and it is a social critique as people didn’t even knew enough their partners, as marriage was merely a business transaction in Victorian times (Güneş, et al., p. 202).

Moreover, Algernon also offered a literary paradox about marriage in:

“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” (Act 1, page 265).

This is paradoxical because Algernon is surprised that married women flirt with their own husbands instead of flirting with people from outside their marriage. For him, this is even scandalous. He even justified it later on the scene with another profound truth concerning marriage: “You don’t seem to realise, that in married life three is company and two is none.” (Act 1, page 265). This is paradoxical as well since three should be multitude instead of company, as marriage was supposedly composed of two people at that time. These two literary paradoxes are a social critique since Algernon is “elevating break of convention into a moral norm” (Reinert, 1956, p. 15). For him, Mary Farquhar is demolishing his principles over marriage. This is a critique on the corruption of marriage during Victorian times (Reinert, 1956, p. 15).

Furthermore, in the second act, there are also literary paradoxes such as:

“MISS PRIM: No married man is ever attractive except to his wife.

CHASUBLE: And often, I’ve been told, not even to her.” (Act 2, page 279).

This is paradoxical because marriage is supposedly composed by people who are attracted to each other, however, Miss Prim suggested the opposite. This is related with the social critique on marriage that Oscar Wilde did with Algernon in the previous example. It is the same statement: Victorianism has corrupted marriage by making it a commodity (Nayar, 2009, p 290).

In addition, Cecily produced another literary paradox in this act regarding marriage: “It would hardly have been a really serious engagement if it hadn’t been broken off at least once.” (Act 2, page 285). This is paradoxical because in order to be serious she considered it should be broken, although being a serious engagement would make it unbreakable, because of the commitment of the couple. This critique is related with the Victorian attitudes concerning appearances, as they were essential for them (Shabir, 2020, p. 81). By breaking the engagement Cecily would produce a scandal worth be discussed amongst society, which is her ultimate goal.

Another topic Oscar Wilde criticized with a literary paradox was appearances. For instance, Gwendolen said: “In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing.” (Act 3, page 294). This statement is paradoxical because it should be the opposite: regarding important issues being truthful is more important than appearances. However, she suggested a different profound truth. This is related as well with the critique to the importance of the appearances that I have explained previously in other examples of ironies and paradoxes.

Finally, the play ends with Jack’s reflection: “it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth.” (Act 3, page 303). This is a literary paradox as well since it reveals Jack’s profound truth: he has been paradoxical because he was lying without knowing he was actually telling the truth; indeed, he was earnest. This is the final critique on the play, as the characters had been hypocrites telling the truth, when they thought they were lying to avoid the hypocrisy of Victorian ideals (Reinert, 1956, p. 17). As Cecily foreshadowed “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.” (Act 2, page 278).

5. CONCLUSION

In this masters' dissertation, the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde has been examined in some depth. As this play can be considered as an instrument of social critique (Jordan, 1970, p. 101), I have tried to explain how Wilde employed comical resources as a form of social criticism.

To that aim, I highlighted the most important features of the historical and literary background of the author and the play, the late Victorian period, in order to provide an accurate context to analyse the work, since context is essential in making possible the understanding of humour (Charina, 2017, p. 130).

In addition, I have presented a linguistic background as part of my theoretical framework, by explaining Grice's Cooperative Principle as well as Austin and Searle's Speech Act Theory. I did so to understand how the humorous effect is achieved linguistically in this play. Finally, I have also examined the definitions and typologies of philosophical and literary concepts, such as irony and paradox, as they are part of the comic resources employed in the play.

All this theoretical background was necessary in order to perform my analysis. I divided the analysis in five subsections. In each of them, I firstly explained the type of irony and paradox, then I clarified how the humour occurred linguistically, and finally I studied the play, by critically evaluating different representative excerpts of each type of irony and paradox.

For instance, I highlighted examples of verbal irony, which are concerned with the contradictory meanings found in the characters' utterances in the play (LiteraryDevices Editors, 2022d, para. 1). I examined different examples which suggested that Wilde used humour to portray the mockery of the value of appearances in Victorian society (Güneş et al., 2021, p. 199), with particular examples on critiques of their dining customs and their marriage conventions. Moreover, there was also an example on how the play criticized the female submissiveness of Victorianism (Jordan, 1970, p. 103).

Additionally, I pointed out some situational ironies, which dealt with the contradictory outcomes some events of the play had (LiteraryDevices Editors, 2022c). These examples highlighted as well the social critique that Oscar Wilde made on the value of appearances in Victorian society, as well as the hypocrisy of people to maintain decorum in meetings (Shabir, 2020, p. 87). Furthermore, Wilde also defended Aestheticism on his play, as it was a cultural

movement born in this age as a response to the Victorian beliefs of usefulness (Güneş, et al., 2021, p. 200). The author did so by portraying how life imitate art, especially with the ironic examples of Cecily's diary, as I explained in my analysis. Also, I also pointed out that the whole plot of the play can be considered a situational irony, because all the character's lies became truth eventually.

Besides, I analysed examples of dramatic ironies in the play too. They were concerned with the gap of knowledge between the audience and some of the characters. (Literary Terms, 2015a, para. 1). Seven different examples of dramatic irony were assessed, where I discussed how they highlighted the criticism on Victorian lifestyle, which indulged to act as desired, instead of what is expected according to appearances (Güneş, et al., 2021, p. 202). This was exemplified in the play by the mechanism of 'Bunburying', as I explained in my analysis.

Moreover, I also studied some paradoxes. For instance, logical paradoxes, which are self-contradictory statements that defy logical reasoning (LiteraryDevices Editors, 2022b, para 18). The first and most obvious example was the subtitle of the play: *A Serious Comedy for Trivial People*. More examples were analyzed in this section, in which I concluded that Wilde used this type of paradox to critique as well the Victorian lifestyle, where serious was considered trivial, and the trivial serious (Reinert, 1965, p. 17), with emphasis on the cult of appearances (Güneş et al, 2021, p. 201).

Finally, I provided a plethora of examples of literary paradoxes, which are different to logical paradoxes because these type is concerned with profound truths (Literary Devices Editors, 2022b, para. 18). Wilde criticised a wide range of topics with this philosophical and literary devices, such as Victorian attitudes on appearances (Shabir, 2020, p. 81), marriage corruption, as it was considered a business to escalate the social ladder (Güneş, et al., p. 202), and fear on the potential social power of education (Shabir, 2020, p. 85).

To conclude this work, I would like to highlight the reasons why I am persuaded that Oscar Wilde criticized and mocked Victorian society in his play. I would like to emphasize that Oscar Wilde is a representative writer of Aestheticism. Thus, I believe his work illustrates the ideas of the movement and that his play *The Importance of Being Earnest* is "the ultimate theatricalization of Aestheticism" (Hanson, 2013, p. 152). Oscar Wilde believed that "manners should be aestheticized" (Jervis, 2014, p. 60). Therefore, he criticized Victorian society morality through his art, with his play and wit, by using different comical resources as forms of social criticism. Oscar Wilde created and introduced different types of ironies and paradoxes in

his play to portray the comical side of an over-civilized society that focused on appearances; as I hope to have shown with my analysis of his work.

In addition, Oscar Wilde's employment and understanding of irony and paradox in his works can be related with his ironic and paradoxical life; as he lived a double-life himself because of being a homosexual (Breuer, 1993, p. 227). His play advocated for liberation and truth, as when it finished all the characters found a happy ending because of being earnest. However, the characters' earnest was also a prove of the cynicism of the age, as they only were truthful by chance at the end, as Jack claimed "it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life has been speaking nothing but the truth" (Act 3, p. 303) This final acceptance of the truth, and its consequent liberation, was portrayed on Wilde himself, as he did not escape England when he was accused of gross indecency. It seemed as if he wanted to finally own up his other life, his personal Bunburying (Breuer, 1993, p. 234).

Finally, I would like to conclude by reflecting upon whether I have fulfilled the objectives set for my research. I consider I have successfully accomplished them as I hope to have shown with my master's dissertation how Oscar Wilde used comic resources as forms of social criticism in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

6. REFERENCES

- Adams, J. E. (2009). *A History of Victorian Literature*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Adut, A. (2005). A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde. *American Journal of Sociology*, 111(1), 213–248. doi:10.1086/428816
- Attardo, S. (2000). Irony markers and functions: Towards a goal-oriented theory of irony and its processing. *Rask*, 12, 3-20.
- Beaugrande, R. (1981). *Introduction to Text Linguistics* (Vol. 1). Longman.
- Breuer, R. (1993). Paradox in Oscar Wilde. *Irish University Review*, 23(2), 224-235.
- Bristow, J. (2016). The blackmailer and the sodomite: Oscar Wilde on trial. *Feminist Theory*, 17(1), 41-62.
- Brown, G., & George, Y. (1983). *Discourse Analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Burgers, C., Van Mulken, M., & Schellens, P. J. (2012). Verbal Irony: Differences in Usage across Written Genres. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 31(3), 290-310. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X12446596>
- Charina, I. N. (2017). Lexical and Syntactic Ambiguity in Humor. *International Journal of Humanity Studies (IJHS)*, 1(1), 120-131.
- Delhorme, C. (2020). Embracing and Rejecting the Ruskinian Heritage in Wilde's Aesthetic Theories. *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 91 (Printemps). <https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.7197>
- Evans, E. (2011, March 29). *History- Overview: Victorian Britain, 1837 – 1901*. BBC Retrieved July 8, 2022, from https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/overview_victorians_01.shtml
- Fabb, N. (2008). Linguistics in the study and teaching of literature. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 2(6), 1135-1148.
- Gardiner, J. (2002). *The Victorians: an age in retrospect*. A&C Black.
- Goldie, P. (2007). *Dramatic Irony, Narrative, and the External Perspective*. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 60, 69–84. doi:10.1017/s1358246107000045

- Grice, H. P. (1989). Further Notes on Logic and Conversation. In *Studies in the Ways of Words* (pp. 41- 57) Harvard University Press
- Güneş, A., Şentürk, S., & Şentürk, Z. (2021). Wearing the Mask of Earnestness: Exploring the Artificial Life in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. *Eurasian Journal of English Language and Literature*, 3(1), 198-206.
- Gylfe, P., Franck, H., & Vaara, E. (2019). Living with Paradox through Irony. *Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes*, 155, 68-82.
- Hanson, E. (2013). Style at the fin de siècle : aestheticist, decadent, symbolist. In K. Powell & P. Raby (Eds.). *Oscar Wilde in Context*. (1st ed., pp. 150-158). Cambridge University Press.
- Harvie, C., & Matthew, H. C. G. (2000). *Nineteenth-century Britain: A very short Introduction*. OUP Oxford.
- Himmelfarb, G. (1988). Manners into Morals: What the Victorians Knew. *The American Scholar*, 57(2), 223-232.
- Hinojosa, L. (2015). *Puritanism and modernist novels: from moral character to the ethical self*. The Ohio State University Press.
- Jakobson, R. (1987). *Language in Literature*. (Pomorska, K. & Rudy, S. Ed.) Harvard University Press
- Jarzabkowski, P. A., & Lê, J. K. (2017). We have to do this and that? You must be joking: Constructing and responding to paradox through humor. *Organization Studies*, 38(3-4), 433-462.
- Jervis, J. (2015). The modernity of the fin de siècle. In M. Saler (Ed.), *The Fin-de-Siècle World* (1st ed., pp. 59-73). Routledge.
- Johnson, R. V. (2017). *Aestheticism*. Routledge.
- Jordan, R. J. (1970). Satire and Fantasy in Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest'. *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 1(3).
- Kardiansyah, M. Y. (2017). English Drama in the Late of Victorian Period (1880-1901): Realism in Drama Genre Revival. *Teknosastik*, 15(2), 64-68.
- Kelen, C. (2007). *An Introduction to Rhetorical Terms*. Humanities-Ebooks.

- Keller, J. (2004). *Irony. Theories of Media: Keywords Glossary*. The University of Chicago
Retrieved July 8, 2022, from <https://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/irony.htm>
- Lišková, R. (2012). *Criticism of Hypocrisy in The Importance of Being Earnest and Lady Windermere's Fan by Oscar Wilde*. [Bachelor's thesis, University of Pardubice] DSpace
<https://dk.upce.cz/handle/10195/47516>
- Literary Terms. (2015a). *Dramatic Irony*. Retrieved July 8, 2022, from
<https://literaryterms.net/dramatic-irony/>
- Literary Terms. (2015b). *Paradox*. Retrieved July 8, 2022, from
<https://literaryterms.net/paradox/>
- LiteraryDevices Editors. (2022a). *Irony*. Retrieved July 8, 2022, from
<https://literarydevices.net/irony/>
- LiteraryDevices Editors. (2022b). *Paradox*. Retrieved July 8, 2022, from
<https://literarydevices.net/paradox/>
- LiteraryDevices Editors. (2022c). *Situational irony*. Retrieved July 8, 2022, from
<https://literarydevices.net/situational-irony/>
- LiteraryDevices Editors. (2022d). *Verbal irony*. Retrieved July 8, 2022, from
<https://literarydevices.net/verbal-irony/>
- LiteraryDevices Editors. (2022e). *Fallacy*. Retrieved July 8, 2022, from
<https://literarydevices.net/fallacy/>
- Loftus, Donna. (2011, February 17). *History- British History in Depth: The Rise of the Victorian Middle Class*. BBC. Retrieved July 8, 2022, from
https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/middle_classes_01.shtml
- McGowan, John. (1990). Artistic Tensions: Tradition, Society, Memory, and Gender || From Pater to Wilde to Joyce: Modernist Epiphany and the Soulful Self. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 32(3), 417–445. doi:10.2307/40754942
- Nayar, P. K. (2009). Late Victorian Literature. In *A Short History of English Literature* (pp. 279-290). Foundation Books. doi:10.1017/UPO9788175968851.019
- Nieto García, J. M. (1997). *Drama and Theatre Analysis: An Introduction*. Universidad de Jaén, Servicio de Publicaciones e Intercambio Científico.

- Powell, K. (2013). Rewriting farce. In K. Powell & P. Raby (Eds.). *Oscar Wilde in Context*. (1st ed., pp. 168-176). Cambridge University Press.
- Purchase, S. (2006). *Key Concepts in Victorian Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Reinert, O. (1956). Satiric Strategy in 'The Importance of Being Earnest'. *College English*, 18(1), 14-18.
- Riquelme, J. P. Between two worlds and beyond them: John Ruskin and Walter Pater. (2013). In Kerry Powell & Peter Raby (Eds.). *Oscar Wilde in Context*. (1st ed., pp. 125-136). Cambridge University Press.
- Roach, P. (1999). Bentham's Utilitarianism in Victorian England. *Utilitarianism: the ethical theory for all times*. Retrieved July 8, 2022, from <https://jeromekahn123.tripod.com/utilitarianismtheethicaltheoryforalltimes/id30.html>
- Ross, A.. (2005). *The Language of Humour*. Routledge.
- Rukhsana, K. (2018, March 31). *History of English Literature ENG-402*. Retrieved July 8, 2022, from https://nanopdf.com/download/history-of-english-literature-eng-402_pdf
- Sadock, J. (2004). Speech acts. In L. R. Horn & G. Ward (Eds.) *The Handbook of Pragmatics*, (1st ed., pp- 53-73). Blackwell Publishing
- Saussure, F. (1916). *Course in General Linguistics* (Baskin, W., Trans.) (Meisel, P. & Saussy, H., Ed.) Columbia University Press
- Shabir, J. S. (2020). Oscar Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest' as a caricature of Victorian England. *Contemporary Literary Review India*, 7 (3), 80-90.
- Shea, V, & Whitla, W. (Eds.). (2014). *Victorian Literature: An Anthology*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.
- Sorensen, R. (2003). *A Brief History of the Paradox: Philosophy and the Labyrinths of the Mind*. Oxford University Press.
- Steinbach, S. (2021, March 12). *Victorian Era*. Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc. Retrieved July 8, 2022, from <https://www.britannica.com/event/Victorian-era>
- Taghiyev, I. (2017). Violation of Grice's Maxims and Ambiguity in English Linguistic Jokes. *IJASOS-International E-Journal of Advances in Social Sciences*, 3(7), 284-288.

- Thomas, D. (1996). It's not what you say, it's that you say it: Speech, performance, and sense in Austin and Deleuze. *Philosophy & rhetoric*, 359-368.
- Wilde, O. (2013). *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Harper Collins Publishers. (Original work published 1891)
- Wilde, O. (2009). The Importance of Being Earnest. In J. E. Gainor, S. B. Garner Jr. & M. Puchner (Eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Drama*. (1st ed., Vol. 2, pp. 260-303). W. W. Norton and Company (Original work published 1895)
- Wilson, D., & Sperber, D. (1992). On verbal irony. *Lingua*, 87, 53-76.
- Wolfreys, J. (Ed.). (2006). *Modern British and Irish Criticism and Theory: A critical guide*. Edinburgh University Press.