

## A Pragmatic Analysis of Oxymoron in Poetry:

Tennyson's "Lancelot and Elaine" as an Example

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### Abstract

This paper purports to explore aspects of implied meaning carried out through the vehicle of oxymoron, which is a figure of speech that juxtaposes two contradictory words (or strings of words) in order to point to a curious fact or a beguiling statement. The different types of oxymoron are studied in this paper in accordance with a pragmatic approach that, though taking into consideration the theoretical implications of oxymoron, is primarily interested in practical aspects of the investigation. Grice's maxims are taken as a point of departure to guide the discussion of both generalized implicature and particularized implicature.

The paper analyzes the different instances of oxymoron present in Alfred Tennyson's "Lancelot and Elaine." After the meaning and significance of each instance are explored, the paper studies the ways in which Tennyson used oxymoron in order to create and maintain a figurative framework for his poem. The paper shows that Tennyson's elaborate use of oxymoron allowed him to deploy further figures of speech in order to relay the dramatic atmosphere of the poem. Finally, the paper concludes that Tennyson's disobeying of Grice's maxims led to the production of new implicated meaning.

**Keywords:** implicature, maxims, oxymoron.

## تحليل تداولي للارداف الخلفي في الشعر:

قصيدة الشاعر تنيسون الموسومة بـ "لانسيلوت و الين" نموذجا

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### الملخص :

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى استكشاف جوانب من المعنى الضمني الذي يمكن توليده بواسطة اسلوب الارداف الخلفي " الذي هو صورة من صور البلاغة كي نؤشر من خلاله على حقيقة مهمة وهي أن هذا النوع من الاعمال الادبية يطرح كل الكلمات المتناقضة " او مجموعة من الكلمات التي تحمل تناقضا في المعنى" وقد تطرق البحث الى تسليط الضوء على النماذج المختلفة من الارداف الخلفي انسجاماً مع المنهج التداولي ،ناهيك عن الاخذ بعين الاعتبار المضامين النظرية للارداف الخلفي وهي تمثل اهتماماً اولياً في الجوانب العملية للبحث. كذلك اخذ البحث بعين الاعتبار ضوابط (كرايس) واعتمدها نقطة انطلاق تقود المناقشة فيها دليلاً على المضامين العامة والخاصة لكلا الحالتين.

تحلل هذه الدراسة حالات مختلفة من الارداف الخلفي احتوتها قصيدة الفريد تنيسون الموسومة بـ "لانسيلوت و الين" وقد تمت الاشارة الى أهمية المعنى، والغاية من كل حالة تم اكتشافها، وبعد ذلك كله تطرقت الدراسة الى الطرق التي استخدمها تنيسون باستخدامه الارداف الخلفي من اجل المحافظة على توظيف الاطار البلاغي لقصيدته. وتبين هذه الدراسة أن استخدام (تنيسون) في توضيح استعمال الارداف الخلفي مكّنهُ من نشر الخطاب البلاغي من أجل أن يعيد الجو الدرامي للقصيدة. وأخيراً، فقد توصلت الدراسة الى أن خروج (تنيسون) عن الضوابط التي وضعها كرايس ادت الى خلق معنى متضمناً جديداً.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المضمون، ضوابط الارداف الخلفي.

## Introduction

According to the Macmillan English Dictionary (2002: 476), oxymoron is an expression that comprises two words containing opposite meanings juxtaposed together for an expressive effect which results from the semantic dissonance between the two expressions. For instance, “bitter sweet,” which is one of the stock examples of oxymoron, derives its punchiness from the act of the successive, though sudden, shift from bitterness to sweetness without qualifications or elaboration. This tendency towards expressive punchiness is present in the very etymology of the term. The term Oxymoron, which was standardized in the English language in the seventeenth century, is derived from the Greek word *oxumōron*, which is composed of two parts: *oxus*, meaning “sharp,” and *mōros*, meaning “foolish” or “dull.”

Intriguingly, then, the etymology of the word oxymoron is oxymoronic. This inherent exemplification that accompanies the name of the term itself highlights the intrinsic existence of opposing ideas in a single term. No wonder, then, that we encounter the term most frequently in expressive contexts, that is literary writing. However, the effect is also deployed in other forms of writing, as we will see soon. At its core, nonetheless, oxymoron remains a figure of speech that combines two terms that are otherwise regarded as opposites. The figure of speech appears “in a range of contexts, from inadvertent errors such as extremely average and deliberate puns like same different, to literary oxymora that have been carefully crafted to reveal a paradox” (Irene, 2014: 65).

Oxymoron is often confused with another figure of speech, namely, paradox. In fact, the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, albeit not in technical contexts where accuracy of use is important. In his *Philosophy for Linguists*, Siobhan Chapman explains the difference between the two terms: “While an oxymoron is the combination of two contradictory words in a single sentence, a paradox is an entire phrase/sentence that appears contradictory but, upon further investigation, could be true or plausible” (Chapman, 2000:143). In other words, paradox depends on the initially apparent contradiction between two terms that, after a more thoughtful consideration, turns out to be not contradictory. In

the end, the two terms are reconciled as not contradictory. On the other hand, however, the two terms juxtaposed in an oxymoron are often contradictory, and they contradict each other even after thoughtful consideration. The effect of the figure of speech depends on the fact that the two terms remain contradictory.

Because of its economy and immediate effect, oxymoron is a staple in a lot of poems that seek to highlight contradictory feelings or express contradictory states of affairs. Literary examples of oxymoron are often cited from William Shakespeare. His *Romeo and Juliet*, which is ripe in contradictory feelings has a lot of examples of oxymoron. Take, for example, these expressions: “loving hate,” “heavy lightness,” “feather of lead,” “bright smoke,” “cold fire,” and “sick health” are all examples of oxymoron.

Although the present paper will delve into these issue as it progresses, its main focus is on two points. First, the paper investigates the way poets use oxymorons. It attempts to answer the questions of whether poets use oxymoron for stylistic variation, to exhibit linguistic talent in using language, or for other uses. Secondly, the paper strives to find out whether there is an implicit relationship between conversational implicature and oxymoron by asking if the use of oxymoron reveal the existence of implied users. If so, the paper asks, what consequences follow the break away from conversational maxims?

### **Defining Oxymoron**

In their *From Absurd to Zeitgeist: The Compact Guide to Literary Terms*, Morner and Rausch define oxymoron as “ a linguistic figure of speech that refers to a pair of terms that contradict each other, but are used together to create a specific and special effect.” (Morner and Rausch, 2017: 158). Indeed, oxymoron is one of a number of expressions, collectively referred to as terms of contradiction, which intentionally and purposefully combine, juxtapose, or align terms that are known to be contradictory in everyday language. The effect of these terms is to bring attention to an emotional stance, a statement of apparent truth or confession of jumbled beliefs. These terms are “used intentionally, for rhetorical effect, and the

contradiction is only apparent, as the combination of terms provides a novel expression of some concept” (Small, 2008:2).

In terms of semantic configuration, the closest figure of speech to oxymoron is paradox. The two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, especially by non-specialists. The two are quite different, however, for oxymoron brings together two terms that are contradictory, and both the intended effect and the ultimate meaning depend on the contradictory nature of the two terms used. In paradox, on the other hand, the contradiction is only apparent, and a closer inspection would ultimately show that the two terms are reconcilable. As one immediately notices, the two terms use contradiction as the basis of their effect, despite the different ways they handle and interpret that contradiction. In fact, oxymoron is sometimes understood as a form of “condensed paradox and paradox as expanded oxymoron” (Chuanyu, 2008: 7).

There are a number of ways oxymoron has been used in literary writing. The two overarching concerns of oxymoron, however, are either calling attention to a situation that cannot be named or highlighting the inherent contradiction of a certain emotional or intellectual context. In conservative societies, especially, a number of writers have used the figure of speech to convey powerful messages. In the Russian context, Vishnevsky titled one of his plays “*An Optimistic Tragedy*,” whereas Tolstoy gave the title “*A Living Corpse*” to one of his works (Richards and Schmidt, 1983: 89). On the other hand, oxymoron has been used to highlight the dual nature of a phenomenon, a concept, or an object. Take, for example, Robert and Kimpur’s *Poor Millionaires* which portrays the empty lives of the rich. The title is captivating and, seemingly, unreconcilable but reading the novel would hammer, once and again, the point that the rich people in the novel continue to be poor despite amassing an exorbitant amount of money. In other words, the oxymoron provided the thread that tied together the events of the novel. As for the presence of oxymoron in poetry, McMahan et al. (1995:89-94) have shown that there are two main uses of the figure of speech in verse: “it is often meant to create a vivid and memorable image or phrase and to make the reader pause a moment to consider the meaning of what was just read.” The economy of poetic language calls for and allows the effective use of oxymoron.

Some poets have used oxymoron not only as a figure of speech but also as a mechanism to provide more coherence to the structure of the poem itself. Because of the curious nature of the ideas generated by an oxymoron, readers often find themselves stopping to seep in the multiple layers of meaning offered by the term. This pause allows the poet to dictate the rhythmic reading of the poem which corresponds to the highs and lows of the flow of ideas and effects in the one poem.

### **Types of Oxymoron**

Traditional definitions of oxymoron emphasized its nature, i.e. the fact that the figure of speech brings together two apparently contradictory terms for an added effect. More recently, however, a number of researchers have attempted to classify the types of oxymoron, rather than just provide example of its use of the ways it is formed. At the behest of these studies is *On the Structure and Understanding of Poetic Oxymoron*, an important book that lays out important classifications for oxymoron. Its author, Yeshayaho Shen (2015: 311-313), distinguishes between direct oxymoron and indirect oxymoron. The former is more or less the traditional understanding of oxymoron, i.e. juxtaposing two terms that are otherwise contradictory. For example, “cruel kindness” is a direct oxymoron since cruelty is the opposite of kindness.

On the other hand, indirect oxymoron is a more elaborate and farfetched use of contradiction. The meaning is not immediately apparent because understanding the oxymoron requires more knowledge of the context of one or both terms. For example, the term “war games” is an example of this type of oxymoron since war is a serious and somber issue, whereas games are traditionally light and inconsequential practices. Figuring out this type of oxymoron requires more involvement from the reader, and that is why Lederer (2008: 5) coined the term opinion oxymoron for indirect oxymoron.

### **Pragmatics and Oxymoron**

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines pragmatics as “the study of how both literal and nonliteral aspects of communicated linguistic meaning

are determined by principles that refer to the physical or social context (broadly construed) in which language is used.” In other words, pragmatics is not concerned with the actual meaning of the words; yet it focuses on the sheds of meaning. By studying pragmatics, it makes possible for us to know what might be meant by an expression in an actual utterance, or when we hear or read it in a specific context. The intended meaning of an utterance is grasped, as Widdowson (1996: 62-66) said, by considering some aspects of pragmatics. At the center of these concerns is the role of implicature, which looks at what a speaker or a writer can imply, suggest, or mean as distinct from what is literally said. Participant cooperation is the principle that allows implicature to work.

Grice (1975: 22-40) highlights the importance of cooperation in conversations and lays out four basic principles, called “maxims,” that characterize a cooperative conversation which, in theory, would yield positively to implicature, one way or another. Grice says that the four maxims determine the quantity, quality, relation and manner of conversations. He elaborates to explain what he means by each of these four principles:

- a. Quality – try to be truthful when communicating.
- b. Quantity – give appropriate amounts of information, not too little and not too much.
- c. Manner – utterances should be clear: brief, orderly and not obscure
- d. Relevance – contributions should be relevant to the assumed current goals of the people involved (Grice, 1975: 22-40).

Although subsequent research hammered out many of the fine aspects of the maxims, Grice’s stipulation remains the most influential statement of these principles. More recently, however, a number of researchers have enriched Grice’s contributions even further. For example, Ghouthan (2018:89) differentiates two types of implicatures, namely: generalized implicature, and particularized implicature. The author explains that the former is a form of implicature that is inferable without any

specific reference needed to the context of the statement. For example, the sentence,

“John walked into a house yesterday and saw a tortoise.”

This sentence makes it clear that the house into which John walked is not John’s house. The reader does not need extra information to reach that understanding.

On the other hand, particularized implicature is one that is inferable only when a specific context is provided. Absent this context the implicature cannot be made appropriately. For example,

Speaker A: “What on earth has happened to the roast beef?”

Speaker B: “The dog is looking very happy.”

Because the adequate context is present, Speaker A likely infers the implicature that “the dog had eaten the roast beef.” This implicature would be made possible by the context imbedded in Speaker B’s contribution to the conversation. Curiously, implicature is also possible because both speakers appear to adhere to the maxims, and Speaker A’s belief that Speaker B respects the maxim of relevance facilitates the implicature.

### **Research Methodology**

The present paper will analyze Alfred Tennyson’s poem “Lancelot and Elaine” in order to examine the pragmatic aspects of oxymoron present in the poem. This poem is especially relevant to the discussion because of the creative and challenging ways it employs oxymoron, especially since this long poem uses oxymoron in different places and in different forms. “Lancelot and Elaine” is about one fair Elaine who devotes her energies to attending to the shield of Lancelot, preventing any rust from damaging it and protecting it from any harm.

The paper singles out examples of oxymoron in the poem, and it parses out the different types and possibilities of meaning intended by the use of the different instances of oxymoron. In addition, it tries to show the implicit pragmatic relationship between Grice’s maxims and the implicated meaning of the selected statements and expressions.



The paper provides three sets of data included, for the sake of clarity and consistency, in three tables. The first table lists the forms of oxymoron used in the poem and comments on the meaning and type of each instance. The second table highlights the presence and importance of implicature gained from disobeying Grice's maxims. Finally, the third table concludes the discussion by mapping out the relation between the different types of oxymoron and how they correspond to certain kinds of implicature.

### Data Analysis and Results

The data analysis depends on extracting and parsing out instances of oxymoron in Alfred Tennyson's poem "Lancelot and Elaine." The first table below is dedicated to highlighting the presence of different forms of oxymoronic expressions and explaining the meaning of each of these expressions. Examples of oxymoron are highlighted in red.

Table 1: forms, meanings, and types of oxymoron

Oxymoron in verses	Types	Meaning
Then fearing <b>rust</b> or <b>soilure</b> fashioned for it.	direct	Elaine is not like the ordinary people. She lives in a chamber up a tower. The poet gives the dramatic image of Elaine by using the direct oxymoron, he is afraid that Elaine's fashion might be rusted.
My life is an <b>organized mess, or controlled chaos,</b> if you will. <b>Same difference.</b>	direct	The present lines are packed with direct oxymora, including "organized mess," "controlled chaos," and "same difference." For something to be organized, it cannot be a mess. Chaos is anything but controlled! And how can something be different and the same. The poet here is expressing his deep sorrow, so that everything is the equal to him. Whether to be organized or mess; a controlled life or a chaotic one; all these images, according to the poet, are equal
That's my <b>adult child.</b> Poor thing still can't get herself into the real adult world.	direct	His beloved is like an adult who acts like a child because she refuses to enter the real world

A moral child without the craft to rule	indirect	A child with morality; yet having no craft to rule
In their own tinct, and added, of her wit	indirect	The poet shows his craft to show that Lancelot wit is not real; an artificial one, i.e. coloured
Stript off the case, and read the naked shield,	direct	faked or artificial cover
All in a misty moonshine, unawares	direct	dramatic image of unclearness
Had trodden that crowned skeleton, and the skull	direct	fake queen
Urged him to speak against the truth, virtuous lie  Truth v.s. lie	direct  indirect	embellished lie  to tell an ornamented lie as if it is true.
Are ye so wise? ye were once so wise not	indirect	a wise man with no wise at all
Henceforth be truer faultness lord to your?"	direct	the sincerest liar
She broke into a little much scornful laugh:	direct	an exaggerated disguised laugh
He is all fault who hath no fault at all	indirect	A man who is full of faults has no mistakes
The tiny trumpeting, giant, can break our dream	direct	The tiny object can be giant in breaking our dreams

Then came an <b>old</b> , dumb, myriad- <b>young</b> man,	indirect	Old in thoughts, young in appearance.
And Lancelot marvelled at the <b>wordless</b> man; <b>Talking</b> with sagemess, wseedom	indirect	A wordless man talking with wisdom, i.e. little words give more meanings
<b>Of manners and of nature not: and she thought That all was nature, all, perchance, for her;</b>	indirect	All what had happened, actually, by accident not previously prepared to
While Arthur to the banquet, <b>bright dark</b> in mood,	direct	Giving the image of instability
Of <b>pure stained</b> glory	direct	Dusty glory

The second table below attempts to highlight the relation, implicit as it may be, between the act of violating Grice's maxims and producing new meaning enabled by implicature. As the table makes clear, Alfred Tennyson violated Grice's maxims. However, as the analysis shows, this violation was not the result of unawareness on the poet's part, but rather the outcomes of attention to literary language. The poet wanted to create a figurative meaning; therefore, his use of oxymoron, in the guise of hyperbole, humour, and irony, is meant to provide a more imaginative and exaggerated portrayal of Elaine. In other words, the goal was creating a dramatic effect, even if that meant violating the conversational maxims. For example, the presence of multiple descriptions of Elaine violates the maxim of quantity, whereas diverting into farfetched details veers off from the maxim of relevance. However, the table shows that violating the maxims was used intentionally by the poet to provide the figurative framework of the poem.

Table (2) maxims and the figurative meaning

Oxymoron in verse	Violated maxim	Meaning of implicature
Then fearing <b>rust</b> or <b>soilure</b> fashioned for it.	quality	exaggeration
My life is an <b>organized mess</b> , or <b>controlled chaos</b> , if you will. <b>Same difference.</b>	manner	dramatic effect
That's my <b>adult child</b> . <i>Poor thing still can't get herself into the real adult world.</i>	quantity	dramatic effect
<b>A moral child without the craft to rule</b>	quality	humour
In their own <b>tinct</b> , and added, of her <b>wit</b>	manner	irony
Stript off the case, and read the <b>naked shield</b> ,	quality	irony
All in a <b>misty moonshine</b> , unawares	quality	irony
Had trodden that <b>crowned skeleton</b> , and the skull	relevance	irony
Urged him to speak against the <b>truth</b> , <b>virtuous lie</b> Truth v.s. lie	quality	humour
<b>Are ye so wise? ye were once so wise not</b>	manner	understatement
Henceforth be <b>truer faultness</b> lord to your?"	quality	irony
She broke into a <b>little much</b> scornful laugh:	quality	exaggeration
<b>He is all fault who hath no fault at all</b>	quantity	dramatic effect
The <b>tiny</b> trumpeting,	relevance	irony

giant, can break our dream		
Then came an old, dumb, myriad-young man,	relevance	humour
And Lancelot marvelled at the wordless man; Talking with sageness, wisdom	relevance	humour
Of manners and of nature not: and she thought That all was nature, all, perchance, for her;	manner	humour
While Arthur to the banquet, bright dark in mood,	manner	dramatic effect
Of pure stained glory	manner	irony

By investigating the types of oxymoron and the types of implicature, one can find a correlation between the types of both implicature and oxymoron. That is, both indirect oxymoron and particularized implicature are contextually based. In other words, their meanings cannot be inferred away from context. Whereas the meaning of direct oxymoron and generalized implicature can be inferred without context, i.e. their meaning is lexically based. Table 3 below clarifies the relation.

Table (3) the relation between types of oxymoron and implicature

Oxymoron in verses	Types of oxymoron	Types of implicature
Then fearing rust or soiture fashioned for it.	direct	generalized
My life is an organized mess, or controlled chaos, if you will. Same	direct	generalized

<i>difference.</i>		
That's my <i>adult child</i> . Poor thing still can't get herself into the real adult world	direct	generalized
<i>A moral child without the craft to rule</i>	indirect	particularized
In their own <i>tin</i> , and added, of her <i>wit</i>	indirect	particularized
Stript off the case, and read the <i>naked shield</i> ,	direct	generalized
All in a <i>misty moonshine</i> , unawares	direct	generalized
Had trodden that <i>crowned skeleton</i> , and the skull	direct	generalized
Urged him to speak against the <i>truth, virtuous lie</i> Truth v.s. lie	direct indirect	generalized particularized
<i>Are ye so wise? ye were once so wise not</i>	indirect	particularized
Henceforth be <i>truer faultness</i> lord to your?"	direct	generalized
She broke into a <i>little much</i> scornful laugh:	direct	generalized
<i>He is all fault who hath no fault at all</i>	indirect	particularized
The <i>tiny</i> trumpeting, <i>giant</i> , can break our dream	direct	generalized
Then came an <i>old</i> , dumb, myriad- <i>young</i> man,	indirect	particularized
And Lancelot marvelled at the <i>wordless</i> man; <i>Talking</i> with sagemess, wseom	indirect	particularized
<i>Of manners and of nature not: and she thought That all was nature, all,</i>	indirect	particularized

perchance, for her;		
While Arthur to the banquet, bright dark in mood,	direct	generalized
Of pure stained glory	direct	generalized

### Conclusion

The present paper concludes that oxymoron as a poetic device can express a range of emotion, and thus using contradictory terms to express deep emotion illustrates how confusing our feelings can be. The use of oxymoron suggests that something can have two qualities at the same time. This concept spurs philosophical thoughts. Likewise, using oxymoron can focus attention on a specific element and make the reader take notice. When an author uses oxymoron to explain or describe a concept, he draws attention to the fact that there is something complex here to be explored. The role of oxymoron in poetry is typically twofold: it is often meant to create a vivid and memorable image or phrase and to make the reader pause a moment to consider the meaning of what was just read. By combining two words or terms together that are inherently contradictory, the use of an effective oxymoron can create a phrase with lasting resonance and a more immediately evocative sensibility. This powerful phrase can also help make a reader stop for a moment to consider the meaning of an oxymoron in the work, which can be used to control the rhythm of a poem or to punctuate a point.

It goes without saying that implicature is the result of disobeying or violating Grice's maxims that are aimed to keep the course of speech or discourse work naturally. That is by betraying Grice's maxims, a new meaning is produced as the above analysis has shown. For instance, the implied meanings of irony and manner are produced by disobeying the maxim of quality.

By investigating the types of oxymoron and the types of implicature, one can find an identical relation between the types of both implicature and oxymoron. That is, both indirect oxymoron and particularized implicature are contextually based. In other words, their meanings cannot be inferred away from context. Whereas the meaning of

direct oxymoron and generalized implicature can be inferred without context, i.e. their meaning is lexically based.

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