

## REVIEW

# Oxymoron in Victor Hugo's Novel «The Man Who Laughs»: A Stylistic and Rhetorical Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the oxymoron as an expressive device actively employed by Victor Hugo in the novel «The Man Who Laughs». The study aims to identify the structural, semantic, and functional features of oxymoronic constructions found in the literary text. Special attention is paid to how semantically opposite elements are combined within a single utterance, forming a poetics of paradox typical of Romanticism. Based on analysis of specific passages from the novel, the research identifies lexical-morphological models of oxymorons and their role in creating emotional tension, vivid imagery, and philosophical depth. Oxymoron is considered not only as a stylistic figure, but also as a key component of the author's worldview, conveying the idea of the fusion of opposites in human fate. The material of the study is the Russian translation of the novel, compared with the original French text. The article applies methods of contextual and lingo-stylistic analysis, whose results confirm the significance of oxymorons in the compositional structure and ideological content of the work.

**Keywords:** Oxymoron; Victor Hugo; The Man Who Laughs; Stylistics; Romanticism; Poetics of Paradox; Linguistic Analysis

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# 1. Introduction

Victor Hugo's historical novel «The Man Who Laughs» (L'Homme qui rit, 1869) is a striking example of late Romanticism, saturated with contrasts and paradoxes. The very image of the protagonist – Gwynplaine, a man with an artificially carved «eternal smile» on his face – contains an inner contradiction: he laughs while being profoundly unhappy. Such contradictions are also reflected at the linguistic level of the work. One of the most noteworthy stylistic devices Hugo uses is the oxymoron – «a combination of words or concepts opposite in meaning that creates the expressive effect of a «witty stupidity»<sup>[1]</sup>. In classical rhetoric, the term oxymoron (from Greek *oxys* 'sharp' and *moros* 'foolish') literally meant a «pointedly foolish» or cleverly nonsensical expression, the deliberate yoking of the incompatible<sup>[2]</sup>. As a literary device, oxymoron is characteristic of Romantic literature, which strove to unite «darkness and light» and «the ugly and the sublime» into a whole. In his famous preface to the drama *Cromwell* (1827), Hugo proclaimed the principle of the synthesis of contrasts as the basis of modern aesthetics: art should, in imitation of nature, «mix in creations – but without merging – darkness and light, the ugly and the beautiful». In Hugo's prose, this principle manifests itself in particular through an abundance of antitheses and oxymora. The present article is devoted to a comprehensive investigation of oxymoron in «The Man Who Laughs»— its theoretical underpinnings, specific realizations in the text of the Russian translation, and the stylistic functions it fulfils in the unique language of the novel.

The theoretical background of the article reviews definitions and the typology of oxymoron as a rhetorical figure and trope, its functions and mechanisms, drawing on the works of both domestic and international researchers. The methodology section describes the approach to identifying oxymoronic constructions in the novel's text and the principles of their analysis (morphosyntactic, semantic, pragmatic). The main section – the analysis of oxymorons – contains a systematic examination of the examples of oxymora identified in «The Man Who Laughs» (based on the Russian translation, with reference to the original French formulations where necessary). Next, in the section on linguistic features and stylistic function, the results of the analysis are synthesized: we consider how the oxymorons in the novel are structured from the perspective of grammar and seman-

tics, and what role they play in Hugo's imaginative world. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings and draws conclusions about the significance of oxymoron for Hugo's idiolect and for expressing the key ideas of the novel.

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to demonstrate that the oxymoron in «The Man Who Laughs» is not merely an ornamental flourish of style, but is closely tied to the central conflicts and paradoxes of the work, serving as an important means of artistic expression. The research draws on more than 25 scholarly sources, including works on stylistic theory, rhetoric, and literary studies, and takes into account international scholarship on oxymoron as a linguistic phenomenon.

In contemporary stylistic scholarship, an oxymoron is a figure in which logically or semantically contradictory, mutually exclusive concepts are combined, thereby forming a new unified meaning. For example, combinations like «living corpse» or deafening silence are classic oxymora: the two elements contradict each other in a sense but together create a striking, paradoxical image. According to I. R. Galperin's apt definition, an oxymoron is a «combination of words in which the meaning of the attribute contradicts or logically excludes the meaning of the subject»<sup>[3]</sup>. In other words, the attribute (usually an adjective or other modifier) expresses a property incompatible with the essence of the object or phenomenon it characterizes.

Oxymoron should be distinguished from related contrastive figures – antithesis and paradox. Antithesis involves a juxtaposition of contrasting ideas, but usually at the level of an expanded statement or context, often in two different clauses or sentences (for example, «Some are no more, while others are far away»<sup>[4]</sup>). A paradox is any statement that contradicts common sense or accepted opinion, yet contains a hidden truth (for instance, Oscar Wilde's aphorism: «Silence is the only answer you should give to calumny»)<sup>[5]</sup>. An oxymoron, however, can be considered a specific subtype of paradox – a «compressed» paradox expressed usually in a phrase or brief expression – and a variety of antithesis, but an intra-sentential antithesis, where opposites are directly joined within a single expression<sup>[6]</sup>. In the French rhetorical tradition it is emphasized that an oxymoron is characterized by a tight coupling of opposing words «shoulder to shoulder» (collocation), without separation by a conjunction or a pause.

The most typical form of oxymoron is the combination of an adjective and a noun: an attributive construction of

the type «sacred horror» or cruel kindness. However, the structural range of oxymoronic combinations is broader. Following Kozinets (2015)<sup>[7]</sup>, Pavlovich (1979)<sup>[8]</sup> and Shen (1987)<sup>[9]</sup>, we distinguish four structural models of an oxymoron in language:

- **Attributive oxymoron** – the classic type: a modifier + modified noun, e.g. «bitter joy» or «beautiful nothingness.» This category also includes cases where the role of modifier is played by an adverb with an adjective, for example «terribly beautiful» (cf. awfully pretty – literally «terribly beautiful» in English) – where the evaluative adverb is, in its literal sense, opposite to the adjective it intensifies.
- **Verbal oxymoron** – a combination of a verb with a dependent word that creates an incompatibility. For example, constructions like «to shout silently» or «to speak soundlessly,» where the action and the manner of its performance contradict each other. In English literature, there are known examples from Bernard Shaw: «to shout mutely»<sup>[10]</sup> or C. S. Lewis: «to cry silently»<sup>[11]</sup>.
- **Sentential (or non-phrasal) oxymoron** – when the opposition is embedded in an entire clause or sentence rather than a concise phrase. For instance: «the garage was full of nothing»<sup>[12]</sup> or John Updike's «silence was louder than thunder»<sup>[13]</sup>. Here the oxymoron arises at the level of context: an empty garage is «full» (of what? – of nothing), and silence is compared to sound, exceeding it. Although formally such examples go beyond a simple phrase, essentially they perform the same function of uniting incompatible notions.
- **Fixed-phrase oxymoron** – cases where inherently opposite elements are united in set terms or idioms. For example, the expression «cruel kindness» or the technical term dry wine (French *vin sec*, literally implying wine without sweetness) – the latter is not perceived as an oxymoron in common usage, but literally it juxtaposes contradictory notions «dry/liquid». These examples show that the boundary between an oxymoronic combination and an ordinary collocation is fluid and depends on the degree of linguistic conventionalization.

In general, as statisticians have noted, oxymora more rarely become clichés in comparison to, say, metaphors, be-

cause their components «repel each other» and hinder frequent repetition. Nevertheless, language does provide examples of oxymorons that have passed into the category of familiar expressions, losing the sharpness of their contradiction – the so-called occasional vs. usual oxymorons. Usual oxymorons are essentially faded, habitual combinations (for example, «sweet sorrow» or even «virtual reality») which are no longer perceived by speakers as paradoxical. Conversely, an occasional (individual-authorial) oxymoron deliberately violates the normal compatibility of words in an innovative way, drawing the reader's attention to itself as a stylistic device. Galperin pointed out that if the figurative (opposite) meaning of one component enters into common usage, the effect of the oxymoron is lost. This is why expressions like «silent scream» or «living corpse» produce a strong impression only so long as they retain the freshness and unexpectedness of the combination.

The chief hallmark of an oxymoron is the semantic opposition of its components. According to E. A. Ataeva's analysis, an oxymoron deliberately violates the logical law of non-contradiction: two mutually exclusive predicates cannot both be true of the same object<sup>[14]</sup>. However, in artistic discourse this contradiction is permitted and even purposefully created by the author for expressiveness – to convey the complex, dialectical aspects of a phenomenon. In oxymoronic combinations, «incompatible and opposite concepts do not destroy each other, but create something new that did not exist before»<sup>[6]</sup>. In other words, an oxymoron yields an additional meaning that could not be expressed without this paradoxical juxtaposition. For example, the phrase «living dead» engenders the image of a zombie or a person who has lost their soul; it is the oxymoronic quality that allows one to concisely characterize a state between life and death. Many researchers have noted the deep philosophical meaning of the oxymoron: it reveals the unity and struggle of opposites, the dialectic of phenomena. Not for nothing is an oxymoron often used to express concepts of the inexpressible or transcendent. For instance, M. Mikhailova analyzes oxymora as a means to verbalize «the semantics of the ineffable»<sup>[15]</sup> showing that they help convey, through language, the most delicate shades of feelings and states that border on opposites (for example, the divine and the earthly, ecstasy and suffering).

From a cognitive perspective, the encounter of oppos-

ing semantic components within an oxymoron leads to a deautomatization of textual perception. The reader is compelled to pause and correlate the contradictory elements in order to grasp the emergent meaning resulting from their combination. This interpretative act requires both intellectual and emotional engagement, which is why oxymoron often functions as a stylistic device of foregrounding, producing an effect of semantic surprise. As noted by A. A. Chernenko, the comprehension of an oxymoron involves the juxtaposition of the meanings of its constituent parts and the derivation of an integrative semantic outcome, resulting in the «deautomatization of perception»<sup>[16]</sup>. However, as the author further observes, repeated exposure to the same oxymoron can lead to its entrenchment in the linguistic consciousness, thereby diminishing its novelty—for instance, titles such as *Back to the Future*, which, while initially oxymoronic, eventually become recognizable cultural labels rather than stylistic anomalies.

In literary works, oxymoron fulfils a range of stylistic functions. First and foremost, it conveys acute emotional states and internal conflicts of feeling. R. Girard, in his analysis of Shakespeare's verse, observed that oxymoron allows the combination of «two emotional opposites – joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, and above all love and hate». In the tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, the abundance of oxymora in the lovers' speech (such as «loving hate,» «brawling love» etc.) precisely communicates the contradictory nature of their passionate love<sup>[17]</sup>. Similarly, in prose, an oxymoron can reflect a character's mixed feelings – for example, bitter joy, ironic love, or desperate hope.

Oxymoron also serves as a means of authorial evaluation and irony. By joining the incompatible, a writer often imbues an oxymoron with a mocking or sarcastic attitude. In journalistic style, such oxymoronic expressions frequently signal the author's wit and linguistic playfulness (e.g. «organized chaos», «original copy» in journalistic texts). In fiction, an ironic oxymoron allows a subtle hint at the illogical or absurdity of a phenomenon being described. According to research in pragmatics, oxymoron is linked to the effect of a deliberate violation of the maxims of communication: essentially it contradicts the maxim of quality (saying something that cannot be true), thereby often achieving a comic or ironic result. H. Colston and J. O'Brien have noted that the sharp contrast embedded in such a figure of speech can amplify the

ironic force of an utterance even more than a straightforward understatement or euphemism<sup>[18]</sup>.

In addition, oxymoron performs a nominative function – it succinctly names a complex phenomenon through a paradoxical image. Many aphoristic expressions are built on oxymoron: for example, the well-known statement defining commercial art as «commercial art is an oxymoron» (often attributed to W. Blake) immediately reveals the author's stance on the issue by using the term itself as a figure of speech<sup>[19]</sup>. In narrative prose, even if an oxymoron is not explicitly coined as an aphorism, it often remains memorable to the reader precisely due to the paradoxical phrasing.

Finally, oxymoron has important compositional and thematic significance in Romantic literature. The Romantics, including Hugo, believed that only by yoking opposites together could one encompass the fullness of life. The oxymoron becomes a linguistic reflection of that «universal antithesis» (Hugo's term) which underlies creation. On the scale of the entire text, recurring oxymoronic images can create a pervasive motif of contrast (for example, the motif of the unity of life and death, light and darkness, etc.). Thus, oxymoron not only adorns a phrase but can also organize the semantic space of a work and underscore its key ideas<sup>[20]</sup>. In particular, as we shall see, in «The Man Who Laughs» the oxymoron is closely tied to themes of the two-facedness of nature and society and the contradictions of human destiny.

To summarize, we can offer a definition: an oxymoron is a stylistic figure that unites logically incompatible or opposite concepts in one expression, whereby a new semantic effect arises that conveys the paradoxical essence of the described phenomenon. In this study, we treat the oxymoron not merely as a rhetorical ornament but as a significant element of Hugo's artistic method, reflecting his Romantic philosophy of opposing forces in unity.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The analysis of oxymora in Victor Hugo's novel was conducted in several stages. The primary material for the study was the text of the Russian translation of «The Man Who Laughs». The Russian translation was chosen for two reasons: first, this article is intended for a Russian-speaking scholarly audience; second, the translation was executed quite faithfully and preserves the stylistic features of the orig-

inal, including Hugo's use of oxymoron. Where necessary, we cross-checked against the original French text to verify the presence of an oxymoron in Hugo's own wording or to identify possible translator transformations<sup>[13]</sup>. (Notably, the Russian translation, published in 1869 almost concurrently with the original, generally strives to maintain Hugo's style: the oxymoronic combinations in the Russian text have counterparts in the French original.)

Oxymora in the text were identified using a combined method: essentially a close reading of the text with supplementary use of search tools for key antonymous pairs. First, a careful reading of the opening chapters was carried out, with annotations of obvious oxymoronic combinations encountered. Then, based on these examples, likely patterns were hypothesized – for example, constructions of the form «X and at the same time Y», where X and Y are opposite qualities. Using digital text search, all occurrences of the phrase «вместе с тем» («at the same time») – a typical marker of oxymoronic construction in the Russian text of Hugo – were found. Similarly, pairs of antonyms or contexts were searched for where words of opposite meanings occur in close proximity (for example, «alive/dead», «laughter/tears», «light/dark», etc.). This approach made it possible to discover both overt and more subtle instances of oxymoronic combination (**Table 1**).

The oxymoronic expressions identified (approximately 15–20 vivid cases in total) were classified according to several parameters:

- By theme and function in the text: oxymora characterizing characters; oxymora in landscape and descriptive passages; oxymora expressing philosophical ideas or authorial generalizations.
- By structure: attributive oxymora (directly juxtaposing opposites within a phrase), predicative or contextual oxymora (opposition within a single sentence), and compositional antitheses of an oxymoronic nature.
- By the degree of explicitness of the contrast: explicit oxymora, where the opposition is obvious (e.g. direct antonyms or universally recognized opposites), versus implicit oxymora, where the contrast is less evident and emerges through context or connotation<sup>[3]</sup>.

For each fragment identified as oxymoronic, a multi-level analysis was conducted:

- Determining the part of speech of the components and the type of syntactic link (a combination within one clause, linked by the conjunction «and», or formed in another way), as well as any grammatical features (for example, unity of tense, number, etc.). We noted that in the Russian translation of Hugo, oxymora are often presented as homogeneous parts of a sentence connected by the conjunction «и» («and») along with the qualifying phrase «вместе с тем» («at the same time»), or as adjective + noun pairs, and more rarely in the form of an entire paradoxical clause.
- Identifying which specific semes (meanings) are in conflict. For example, the adjective «living» carries the same «having life», whereas the noun «corpse» carries «dead body»; the conflict is direct. In other cases, the conflict might be between connotative meanings (for instance, «noble villain» – a clash between a role with positive connotations and one with negative connotations, essentially an opposition of moral valuation). We consulted explanatory dictionaries of Russian to clarify word meanings during analysis (for example, determining that «рассеянный взор» – a «distracted gaze» – i.e. an unfocused, wandering look – as opposed to a «сосредоточенный», fixed stare).
- Discussing the role of the given oxymoronic expression in context – what mood, emotion, or idea it conveys, and why the author may have chosen this device. We took into account whether the oxymoron is spoken by a character (i.e. appears in dialogue/monologue) or occurs in the narrator's discourse, and how the surrounding text either highlights or downplays the effect of the oxymoron.
- For each Russian oxymoron, we checked the corresponding passage in the French text (using a public-domain edition on Wikisource or a French publication of the novel)<sup>[22]</sup>. This enabled us to establish whether the given oxymoron is a translation of a French oxymoron, or possibly the result of a translatorial rendering. In the few cases where discrepancies were observed, we noted them separately. Overall, the translator (the novel appeared in Russian in 1869, essentially simultaneously with the original) endeavored to preserve Hugo's style: the oxymoronic com-

**Table 1.** Examples of Oxymorons in Victor Hugo's *The Man Who Laughs*<sup>[21, 22]</sup>.

№	French Oxymoron (Hugo, <i>L'Homme qui rit</i> )	English Gloss	Structure	Type of Opposition & Stylistic Function
1	«toute cette clarté était obscure»	all that brightness was dark	Subject + Adjective	Light vs dark → stresses the ambiguous, dangerous attraction of Josiane's letter to Gwynplaine
2	«une ouverture à deux battants, et en même temps une fermeture inquiétante»	an opening with two leaves, and at the same time a disturbing closure	Co-ordinated NP	Open vs closed → dramatizes the simultaneous promise and threat hidden in the message
3	«On voit, et l'on ne voit plus»	One sees, and one sees no more	Parallel clauses	Perception vs blindness → mimics the blinding flash-and-dark of the snow-storm, heightening terror
4	«Il y avait dans ses prunelles du feu, et de la nuit»	In her pupils there was fire, and night	Prepositional phrase	Light vs dark → conveys Dea's other-worldly, burning yet blind gaze
5	«En même temps que spectre, il était homme. ... Spectre extérieur, homme intérieur.»	At once a spectre and a man... outer ghost, inner man	Clause + apposition	Dead vs living → sums up Gwynplaine's tragic dual nature, comic mask hiding human soul
6	«le chaos rétablissant l'ordre»	chaos restoring order	Noun + participle	Disorder vs order → Romantic vision of the sea's «wild nursery» guiding the orphaned infant's fate
7	«la cloche allait s'affaiblissant ... son silence les terrifia» – «rien n'est plus affreux»	the bell kept weakening... its silence terrified them – nothing is more dreadful	Noun phrase inside contrast	Sound vs silence → oxymoronic dread: relief turns to horror when the bell stops
8	«cette émotion s'émousse. Rien n'est plus faux.»	People say emotion dulls; nothing is more false	Pseudo-quotation + negation	Blunted vs sharpened → flips a cliché to show pain intensifying, not fading

binations in the Russian text do have equivalents in the French original. For example, «нелюдимый и словоохотливый» («unsociable and talkative») – an obvious oxymoron in the description of Ursus – corresponds to Hugo's French «sociable comme une porte de prison, mais bavard quand même» (literally: «unsociable as a prison door, but talkative all the same»).

It should be noted that the boundaries of what counts as an oxymoron in the text are sometimes blurred. We included in our analysis even extended paradoxical constructions that are essentially oxymoronic in spirit, although they exceed the scope of a simple phrase. For example, the clause «not to live and yet to continue to exist» is treated as oxymoronic, even though it is structured as an infinitival phrase. The criterion for inclusion was the simultaneously expressed incompatibility of meanings.

Overall, the methodology combines qualitative textual analysis with elements of quantitative observation (counting and categorizing cases). All identified instances of oxymoron were considered in the context of the entire novel, in order to detect recurring motifs and to assess the frequency of this device in Hugo's prose. Based on the analysis, generalizations were made about the stylistic function of oxymoron in the language of the novel.

### 3. Results

In Hugo's novel, oxymoronic constructions appear both in the authorial narrative and in the characters' speech, performing various artistic functions. Below, we examine key examples, grouping them by their thematic role in the text.

In the opening chapters of the novel, the author presents a portrait of the itinerant philosopher Ursus, resorting to an oxymoronic description of his nature. Ursus is depicted as a contradictory personality: «Being unsociable and at the same time talkative... he got out of the predicament by conversing with himself». The combination «unsociable and talkative» is clearly oxymoronic: the first word describes a person who shuns society, someone reclusive, while the second means talkative or loquacious. Hugo is essentially saying that Ursus is a misanthrope who, however, cannot live without conversation. This oxymoron neatly conveys the dual nature of the character: externally a grumbling recluse, he inwardly feels a need for communication – even if he only talks to himself or to his pet wolf. Morphologically, the construction is framed with the conjunction «and» plus the clarifying phrase «at the same time», explicitly indicating the simultaneity and paradoxicality of the qualities. Thus, in a single sentence the author encapsulates the internal con-

flict of Ursus's character. The oxymoron here functions as a concise psychological portrait: the reader immediately sees that the character is more complex than he appears and that he combines incompatible traits.

Another character whose description is given through an implicit oxymoron is Lord David Dirry-Moir (the brother of Duchess Josiane). His portrayal is drawn with irony: he is at once a court flatterer and a cynic. In the author's depiction it is noted that this lord was «an obsequious courtier and at the same time a very haughty nobleman», and that he could be now short-sighted, now sharp-sighted – «depending on the circumstances», «honest by nature, ... but capable of donning a mask in an instant», and so on. Here Hugo essentially enumerates a series of oxymora, revealing the two-facedness of the aristocrat: obsequious (servile) vs. haughty, sincere vs. hypocritical. These oppositions are not formulated as a single phrase, but they are connected by the construction «and at the same time», which clearly marks the oxymoronic nature of the characterization. In effect, Lord Dirry-Moir is a living oxymoron – a «walking paradox», as Shakespeare might say<sup>[23]</sup>. Hugo demonstrates this character's chameleon-like ability to adapt: he combines opposite qualities depending on the situation. Stylistically, this technique accentuates the hypocrisy and inconsistency of the courtier's nature. For the reader, the litany of incongruities creates a somewhat comic, satirical image of a man who is all masks. In this case, the oxymoron serves an ironic unmasking function: by listing mutually exclusive epithets, the author implies that the lord lacks integrity – his personality is a collection of poses.

Interestingly, in both cases (Ursus and Lord David) the oxymoron emphasizes not a harmonious unity of opposites, but rather a split, an inner conflict. In Ursus's character, it is the conflict between misanthropy and a thirst for communication; in the lord's character, between servility and pride. The oxymoronic characterizations allow these conflicts to be expressed compactly. Morphologically, they are presented either as a pair of adjectives in one clause («unsociable and talkative») or as opposing traits juxtaposed within one sentence. Semantically, they involve direct antonymic pairs (unsociable vs. talkative) or contraries (honest vs. deceitful). Pragmatically, both examples are embedded in the author's narrative voice, as part of descriptive characterization rather than spoken by the characters themselves, and therefore they carry a distinctly authorial evaluation. In both

cases one senses the author's wry smile at such «strange» combinations of qualities.

In *The Man Who Laughs*, Hugo masterfully paints scenes of nature, often employing oxymoron to convey sublime or eerie effects. One example is the description of the ocean during a storm. The chapter devoted to the raging sea contains the following oxymoronic formulation: «Nothing is more consistent and at the same time more capricious than the ocean». Here two adjectives – «consistent» (i.e. logical, orderly) and «capricious» (foolish, whimsical) – are united in a comparative construction describing the ocean. This unexpected pair of epithets for the sea appears paradoxical: the ocean is the embodiment of order and simultaneously of absurdity. What is meant by this? The context provides clarification: the author goes on to explain that the caprices of the sea are part and parcel of its might – the waves now attack, now retreat; the ocean's chaotic whims are a component of its grandeur. In this way, Hugo leads the reader to the idea of the dual essence of the ocean: it is majestic and mighty (in this sense «logical», consistent in obeying natural laws), but the behavior of its waves seems to humans chaotic, «capricious». The oxymoron «consistent/capricious ocean» perfectly reflects the Romantic idea of the fusion of order and chaos in nature. Stylistically, this creates an effect of sublime paradox, typical of the Romantic landscape: nature cannot be grasped by reason alone; it unites incompatible characteristics. The contrast embodied in the phrase heightens the sense of the sublime (mingled awe and wonder) that Romantic literature often seeks to evoke. Indeed, as researchers note, Romantic writers frequently used contrasting imagery to arouse the «fearful grandeur» of nature. Hugo, following this tradition, introduces oxymorons as a linguistic means of achieving such contrast.

Another striking oxymoron in the description is the scene of the hanged man discovered by the child protagonist at the beginning of the novel. This scene is filled with Gothic horror, and the oxymoron here conveys the eerie duality of the experience. The boy Gwynplaine stumbles at night upon the corpse of a hanged man; the author describes the dead man's gaze: «It was a gaze that was distracted and at the same time indescribably intent; in it were light and darkness». This oxymoron is twofold: first, «distracted and... intent» – two opposite qualities of a gaze (wandering, unfocused vs. intensely concentrated); second, the description is immedi-

ately reinforced by a metaphor: «in it [in the gaze] were light and darkness». Physically, a corpse of course has no gaze – the eyes are filled with tar, which looks like tears – but Hugo poetically endows the empty sockets with a stare that unites the incompatible. Light and darkness in this dead gaze form a powerful symbolic oxymoron, simultaneously reflecting the presence and absence of life. As Hugo himself writes of the corpse: «It was tangible to the touch and yet did not exist» – defining the dead man as materially perceptible but not alive. This paradox – «he was and was not» – is akin to the Shakespearean image of «to be and not to be» combined in one vision. Hugo underscores the unnaturalness of what is seen: «to die and not be absorbed by death – in all this... there is something inexpressible». That is, the corpse's body is preserved (the tar preserves it), creating the impression that death has not fully prevailed.

In these descriptions, oxymoron functions to create an oppressive, supernatural atmosphere. A «distractedly-intent gaze» is an impossible gaze, and therefore terrifying. It leaves a strong impression on the reader: it seems that the dead man both sees and does not see at the same time – staring nowhere and piercing through everything. Morphologically again the construction is framed by «and at the same time», which clearly marks it as oxymoronic. Semantically, it features direct antonyms (distracted vs. focused, light vs. darkness). This example shows how flexibly Hugo applies oxymoron: not only in obvious pairings like «dead alive», but more subtly – at the level of describing an effect (a gaze without eyes) where the contradiction conveys a philosophical subtext about the border between life and death.

Also in the storm scene, we should note a brief but expressive oxymoron: «you see, and at the same time you do not see» – this is how the author describes the instantaneous alternation of light and dark during lightning flashes in the tempest. The phrase «You see, and yet you do not see» conveys the sensation of confused perception: in the moment of the lightning flash, the hero seemingly sees everything around him as if it were day, but immediately after he sees nothing again in the ensuing darkness. This rhetorical device makes the description of the storm more vivid: the reader almost experiences that disorienting effect, a kind of «blindness from the flash». Here the oxymoron approaches a paradoxical formulation: «first – everything, then – nothing»,

intensifying the dynamic of the description.

Thus, in the landscape and narrative-descriptive fragments, Hugo's use of oxymoron serves to vividly depict contrasting states of nature: the calm and fury of the sea, light and darkness, life and death. It amplifies the effect of the Sublime (the mix of awe and terror) – a key aesthetic impression in Romanticism. As mentioned above, Romantic writers often used contrasting imagery to evoke the «terrible grandeur» of nature, and Hugo, in this tradition, employs oxymorons as a linguistic device for such contrast.

Beyond specific descriptions, the oxymoron in «The Man Who Laughs» is also connected to the novel's global ideas. One of the central themes is the union of opposites in human fate: the low and the high, joy and sorrow, ugliness and nobility. The very figure of Gwynplaine – a poor mutilated man who becomes a peer of England – embodies an oxymoron in social terms (a beggar aristocrat) and in emotional terms (a laughing sufferer)<sup>[24]</sup>. Although Hugo does not explicitly label Gwynplaine with the term «oxymoron», a number of statements in the text underscore this paradoxical nature. For example, one can say of Gwynplaine that he «laughs from grief». In the text itself this idea is expressed in a more developed form: «But does laughter always express merriment?» the narrator asks rhetorically. It is then revealed that Gwynplaine's horrifying smile is the result of violence, and that nature «could not create such a perfect work... without outside help» from evildoers. Essentially, the entire image of the protagonist rests on the oxymoronic combination of the comic and the tragic. Hugo introduces the notion of «Gwynplaine's mask» – this mask of laughter conceals immeasurable sorrow. The narrator states plainly: «He was the pole opposite to sorrow... Spleen was at one end, Gwynplaine at the other». Here spleen (melancholy) and Gwynplaine's laughter stand as two opposite poles. The result is a kind of implicit oxymoron: a man who is the antithesis of sorrow is himself essentially sorrow disguised as laughter.

Another philosophical and rhetorical passage in the novel, structured as a series of oxymoronic pairs, is the author's reflection on the separation of the living being from life itself. In the context of the hanging-man scene, there appears a chain of paradoxes: «Not to live and at the same time to continue to exist, to be in the abyss and at the same time outside it, to die and not be swallowed up by death –



... there is something unnatural and therefore ineffable in this.»Here we have three oxymoronic formulas in a row: not living vs. existing, in the abyss vs. outside the abyss, dying vs. not being engulfed by death. Hugo uses these to describe the state of the hanged body preserved by tar – essentially the state of a «living dead man». This oxymoronic triad transcends the specific image and takes on an almost existential meaning, as a sign of something unnatural that disrupts the harmony of the world. Such a device – oxymora strung together – heightens the sense of uncanny irreality of the scene. At the same time, it can be viewed as a rhetorical figure of gradation, where each succeeding pair deepens the paradox: first life/non-life, then being in hell's abyss/outside it, finally death/non-death. The culmination is the admission that it is ineffable, i.e. language literally hits a limit (yet Hugo still manages to express it through oxymoron). Thus, oxymoron becomes a means of expressing the limits of human experience, when ordinary words are inadequate and a paradoxical formula is required.

It should be noted that the language of the novel as a whole is permeated by antitheses, and the oxymoronic formulas are their most sharp, concentrated form. The general atmosphere of contrast – between the luxury of palaces and the poverty of common folk, between the virtue of the maiden (the blind Dea) and the vice of the court, between the truth of the heart and the falsehood of society – is also reflected at the lexical level. For example, the homes of the wealthy are called a «house of tears», and Gwynplaine's deformity is described as simultaneously a gift and a curse. These expressions are not always cast as explicit oxymora, but contextually they juxtapose opposites (a home is normally a place of happiness, here one of tears; a gift is usually a blessing, here a torment). An explicit oxymoron, being an open contradiction, can sometimes serve as a key to interpreting such metaphors in the novel.

Victor Hugo makes extensive use of oxymoron in various stylistic registers of the novel – from character portraits with a touch of humour to highly poetic landscape descriptions and philosophical generalizations. In the Russian translation, most of these oxymoronic instances were successfully preserved, indicating their importance to the original text. Morphologically, adjective-antitheses and constructions with the conjunction «and at the same time» predominate; semantically, clear antonymic pairs are common (life/death,

light/darkness, love/hate, etc.). In some cases (as with the ocean or the image of Gwynplaine), more subtle oxymoronic combinations are employed, relying on the contrast of concepts from different domains rather than direct antonyms (e.g. logical-absurd, comic-terrible). The pragmatic effect varies throughout: in some places the oxymoron startles the reader with horror, in others it evokes a bitter smile, in others it prompts reflection on a contradiction. But in all cases, it draws attention to the essence of the phenomenon depicted, making it memorable and semantically multi-layered.

## 4. Discussion

On the basis of the above analysis, we can generalize the linguistic-structural features of oxymorons in «The Man Who Laughs» and understand what stylistic roles they play in the text.

A characteristic form of oxymoron in the novel is the pairing of two qualities with the conjunction «and» (often accompanied by the phrase «вместе с тем», «at the same time»). This model allows the author to apply a «double stroke» in describing a character or phenomenon. Examples include: «unsociable and talkative», «distracted and... intent», «obsequious and... haughty», «consistent and... capricious». Such a grammatical structure – two adjectives attached to one subject or noun – is convenient for Hugo in that it literally collides two opposites in one sentence. The Russian language of Hugo's translation (and the French original as well) is rich in exactly these constructions. As S. B. Kozinets notes, the most widespread type of oxymoron across languages is the attributive model (modifier + noun), and Hugo's work confirms this tendency<sup>[7]</sup>.

However, the author is not limited to attributive models. We have seen instances of oxymoronic effects at the level of whole sentences («you see and you do not see», «to die and not die completely»). Here verb forms, infinitival phrases, and compound sentence structures come into play. For example, the clause «not to live and... to exist» opposes two infinitives joined by «and». This syntax is akin to the style of aphoristic sayings or philosophical maxims. It enhances the weight of the statement, giving it a tone of timeless wisdom (cf. the Latin adage *festina lente* – «hurry slowly», itself an oxymoron).

We can also note the frequent use of pronominal-

adverbial constructions: «here everything is indescribable – both this gaping abyss, and... its utter facelessness, and this chiaroscuro...» etc. In the storm excerpt, we see a series of images, among which one – светотень («light-dark», i.e. chiaroscuro) – is essentially an oxymoron (the combination of light and shadow). The word svetoten' («chiaroscuro») usually belongs to the realm of painting, but Hugo applies it to the lived reality of the storm, where darkness and lightning intermingle. This is an example of a noun oxymoron, where opposites fuse into one compound word. Thus, the range of parts of speech involved in the novel's oxymora includes adjectives, nouns (within compound words or phrases), verbs, and adverbs (in oppositional pairs like see/not see, live/not live, etc.).

Nearly all the cases we found rely on antonymy or strongly contrasting concepts: life–death, night–day, good–evil, talkativeness–silence, and so on. These are explicit oxymora in E. A. Ataeva's terminology – where the opposition is obvious<sup>[14]</sup>. In some instances, however, the opposition is more connotative. For example, «consistent vs. nonsensical» is not a typical pair of antonyms, but in context (logical vs. illogical) they are opposed. Similarly, with «sacred horror»: sacred usually carries a positive, light connotation, while horror is negative, dark; they are not direct antonyms per se, but occupy opposite poles of an emotional scale (the sacred sublime vs. the demonic frightening). Such cases can be called implicit oxymora, where the conflict of meanings is revealed through cultural associations<sup>[18]</sup>. Understanding them requires a broader context. Hugo, writing for an educated audience, could expect that an oxymoron like «sacred horror» (tellingly, the title of one of the chapters of the novel is «Sacred Horror») would be understood in the spirit of the Christian concept of timor Dei – a reverential fear of God that unites awe and sanctity. The translator of the Russian edition notably chose this very phrase. Thus, even Hugo's implicit oxymora are embedded in a cultural context where their opposing components are traditionally linked (such as light and dark, the comic and the tragic).

At the functional level, several recurring motifs of oxymoronicity can be distinguished that are important for the novel's style:

- Contrast as a source of tragicomic effect. The novel repeatedly teeters on the boundary between the tragic and the comic. An oxymoron is an ideal device for cre-

ating a tragicomic effect. The protagonist – a clown by profession and a tragic figure by fate – himself embodies this effect. In the language of the novel, this is expressed, for example, through scenes where laughter is present beside death (the carnival of laughter set next to the gallows – the reality of the novel). Scholars have noted that the mixing of the comic and the terrifying is a distinctive trait of Hugo, stemming from his idea of combining the grotesque and the sublime. In the text, such a mixture is signalled by oxymora. They function as genre markers, indicating to the reader that this is neither pure tragedy nor pure satire, but a complex blend – a Romantic drama with elements of grotesque. For instance, when Gwynplaine in jester's garb enters the House of Lords, the entire scene is essentially one big oxymoron (a clown among peers). Stylistically, Hugo reinforces this effect through sharp contrasting epithets, even if no explicit oxymoronic phrase appears – the situation itself plays that role. Nevertheless, oxymoronic formulations elsewhere prepare the reader to appreciate such tragicomic collisions.

- Expression of emotional turmoil and extremes of feeling. When characters experience a clash of feelings, their speech or the author's description of their state may resort to oxymorons. In the novel there are relatively few direct monologues containing oxymora (Hugo's style is more narratorial), but indirectly their emotional turmoil is conveyed through the narrator's voice. For example, Duchess Josiane's reaction to Gwynplaine's rejection (the scene in which this spoiled aristocrat meets resistance for the first time) is not described with an explicit oxymoron, but her state could be labelled as attractive repulsion or humiliated anger – essentially an internal oxymoron of feeling. In other texts (for instance, in Shakespeare) such conflicting emotion is voiced quite literally: «O serpent heart, hid with a flowering face!» (Juliet about Romeo after he kills Tybalt) – a classic oxymoron for Juliet's mixed love and hate. Hugo, however, more often leaves such things implicit. But on a meta-textual level, oxymoron serves as a model for describing these kinds of emotional states.
- Authorial philosophy of opposites. Hugo as a thinker

strives to show the wholeness of the world through the unity of opposites. His continual juxtapositions of low and high social classes, of good and evil, of destiny and chance – all of these are not just plot devices but part of his worldview. The oxymoron is essentially the linguistic embodiment of the principle whereby opposites co-exist in unity. When the author writes that the ocean is simultaneously logical and absurd, or that a corpse sort of exists and sort of doesn't, he is asserting a dialectical view: things contain their opposite. For Hugo, as a Romanticist, this outlook is natural (he admired Shakespeare precisely for the «immeasurable antithesis ever presents» in Shakespeare's plays. Thus, the oxymoron for Hugo is not just a stylistic figure, but an aesthetic and philosophical principle. Its stylistic function goes beyond the level of the individual phrase: the multitude of oxymora in the text creates an atmosphere of paradoxicality in the world of the novel.

- **Compositional function – accentuating key moments.** Many of the oxymoronic phrases we have noted occur at climactic or pivotal moments of the narrative. For example, the description of the storm at sea coincides with the climax of danger for the protagonists; Gwynplaine's encounter with the corpse is a turning point in his destiny; the characterizations of Ursus and the lord appear as we are introduced to these important figures. In these places, oxymoron helps heighten the expressiveness of the scene and sharpen the reader's focus. It can be compared to an emotional spike in music – a dissonance which is later resolved. After an oxymoronic phrase, there often follows either an extended explanation, or a powerful emotional reaction from a character, or a scene shift – all of which underscore the importance of that moment. Thus, compositionally, the oxymoron serves as a climactic stylistic device that lodges in the reader's memory.

In sum, the oxymora in «The Man Who Laughs» serves a multifaceted stylistic purpose – they simultaneously embellish the language, convey deep contradictions of characters and situations, create emotional resonance, and reflect the central ideas of the novel about the unity of opposites. Hugo wields this device virtuously, without overusing it to the point of formulaic cliché: each oxymoron is justified by context

and carries a specific weight.

It is worth separately noting the role of translation: the translator of the Russian edition succeeded in reproducing the oxymoronic quality of the original, often verbatim (as in the cases analysed above)<sup>[25]</sup>. In some languages it can be difficult to preserve an oxymoron in translation, but Russian is quite close to French in its capacity for compound expressions and binary oppositions, so the key oxymora are conveyed adequately. This allows Russian readers to feel almost fully the stylistic intent of Hugo. Of course, certain nuances of shading might not be entirely captured: for example, the concept of the «grotesque and the sublime» from Hugo's preface is a motif that does not explicitly appear in the translated novel's text, though it is embodied through imagery. However, the main oxymoronic pairs (light–dark, life–death, laughter–tears, nobility–baseness) are present in the translation. This suggests that the translator's work largely preserved the oxymoronic motifs, enabling the target audience to experience Hugo's paradoxical style. (Indeed, problems of rendering oxymoron in literary translation have been studied, and Russian appears well-equipped to handle such challenges)

## 5. Conclusions

The study of oxymorons in Victor Hugo's novel shows that this trope and stylistic device is an essential part of the work's poetics. The oxymoron in the novel is neither accidental nor isolated: on the contrary, many details of the narrative are constructed on the principle of oxymoronic combination, reflecting Hugo's central idea of the indivisibility of opposing forces in life and society.

The theoretical overview confirmed that an oxymoron is a deliberate combination of the incompatible – a «witty» violation of logic for the sake of expressing a paradox<sup>[26]</sup>. The classic structure of oxymoron – the pairing of antonymous concepts – received diverse manifestations in Hugo's novel. We identified attributive oxymora («unsociable talkative», «sacred horror»), predicative contradictions («to see and not see»), as well as extended paradoxical constructions («not to live and to continue to exist»). The analysis of concrete examples revealed the main functions of these devices: creating vivid characterizations (through paradoxical epithets), intensifying emotional tension in descriptions of nature and

situations, and expressing key themes (such as the unity of laughter and suffering in the image of Gwynplaine, the fusion of terror and sanctity, baseness and grandeur).

It can be concluded that for Hugo, an oxymoron is a means of artistically typifying the contradictions of an era and of human nature. «The Man Who Laughs» is filled with contrasts: between the rich and the poor, the external and the internal, good and evil. Oxymoronic combinations at the linguistic level accumulate these contrasts, making them palpable and memorable for the reader. They lend the text a special expressiveness, ranging from the ironically comic (as in the case of Ursus or Lord Dirry-Moir) to the tragically sublime (as in the storm scene and the gallows scene).

Importantly, Hugo's oxymora do not appear alien or forced – they are organically woven into the fabric of the narrative. This reflects the writer's mastery: in using such a striking device, he does not turn the novel into a string of aphorisms or witticisms, but preserves its vitality and psychological credibility. When we read the phrase «the head lived, but the face was dead» about Gwynplaine, we do not perceive it merely as a rhetorical trick; we feel the hero's tragedy – and it is precisely thanks to the oxymoronic form that this tragedy is expressed with maximum power.

An analysis of a specific linguistic device like an oxymoron allows for a deeper understanding of Victor Hugo's style. We may note that a penchant for oxymoronic expressions is a characteristic trait of his idiolect, echoing the general Romantic tendency toward paradox. At the same time, Hugo brings his own emphasis: his oxymora often have a social dimension (the laughter of the poor at the aristocracy, ugliness as beauty, etc.), which makes them part of the realistic impetus of his prose.

In conclusion, we underscore that the oxymoron in «The Man Who Laughs» is not just a stylistic figure, but one of the keys to understanding Hugo's worldview. The novel's very title contains a hidden oxymoron: a laughing man who is in essence deeply unhappy. This «laughter through tears» pervades the entire work, making it one of Victor Hugo's most paradoxical and poignant creations. Hugo's oxymoronic language helps the reader to feel all the bitterness and grandeur of the life he depicts – a life in which beauty and ugliness, joy and suffering, love and death inevitably coexist.

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Conceptualization, B.K. and M.O.; methodology, B.K.; software, B.S.; validation, B.K., A.Z. and B.S.; formal analysis, B.K. and B.R.; investigation, B.K.; resources, B.K.; data curation, B.K.; writing—original draft preparation, B.K.; writing—review and editing, A.Z. and B.R.; visualization, B.S.; supervision, M.O.; project administration, M.O.; funding acquisition, A.Z. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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The data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Therefore, data sharing is not applicable. If additional materials or datasets were used, they are appropriately cited in the References section.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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