



Seven Types of Ambiguity

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Revised twice since it first appeared, it has remained one of the most widely read and quoted works of literary analysis. Ambiguity, according to Empson, includes "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language." From this definition, broad enough by his own admission sometimes to see "stretched absurdly far," he launches into a brilliant discussion, under seven classifications of differing complexity and depth, of such works, among others, as Shakespeare's plays and the poetry of Chaucer, Donne, Marvell, Pope, Wordsworth, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and T. S. Eliot.

Seven Types of Ambiguity Details

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Liam says

Was it just me, or were the examples chosen far too few and far too unclear? The space at the beginning of each chapter should have been the place to lay out exactly what is in question. A few homely examples from the then-present day and age would have made the concept solid. Instead, the key words in his examples are often so arcane that a modern person is immediately strained to search for any meaning on the face of them at all, never mind competing ambiguities!

I think there's definitely a lot to a few of the distinctions that he makes (for example that between an ambiguous word that points a different way forward than backward (type 5) and when scope for ambiguity is so large as to allow for mystical and profound interpretations (type 4/6)) but others seem, as he freely admits a couple of times, very minor elaborations on others. Why not 5 types? Or 3? If the writer will not treat his own categories with any gravity, as Empson's breezy seminar-free manner refuses to, then I suggest that he does not put it in the *title of his book*.

That all said, I am not the target audience for this book (the target audience, I would flatter myself by guessing, would be a small and intimidating circle of scholars). A reader should not expect a scientific-objective account of the linguistic resources available to the literary writer, in the style of a Stephen Pinker book, but rather a very erudite and personal reflection on the joys of reading poetry, "scientific" in the older sense which presumes a familiarity with the whole: all the great poets of the canon from Chaucer onward, and with the latin sources of so much English literary history to boot.

Warren R. says

Under the false guise of literary criticism, William Empson has produced a true comic masterpiece, a book of enormous intellectual energy and verbal wit, which is closer in spirit and "atmosphere" to the impractical, rambling novels of Sterne than to the grave Practical Criticism of I.A. Richards.

At the same time, Empson puts forward his thesis about "ambiguity" in poetry, which actually is not that ambiguous and nonsensical, if you could just stop laughing for a second (which you couldn't possibly).

Jim Elkins says

This is "reviewed"--used, I take in in Empson's spirit--in my book "Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?"

S says

turgid and baffling (e.g. one of his types depends on the process of the author, not on the text explicitly, but we are supposed to read this into the text—?), but his types of ambiguities are useful to think about, if nothing else.

Meghan says

Everybody knows there's seven types of ambiguity...or do they?...is there? Huh? As far as literary criticism goes, Empson's book is actually an enjoyable read.

Lysergius says

An interesting and stimulating look at the presence and effects of ambiguity in poetry. Calling up various currents in literary critical trends such as the rediscovery of the metaphysical poets and the insights of Freud, Empson teases apart a number of examples to reveal the seven types of ambiguity.

It actually makes for interesting reading, since the examples he draws on are varied and often obscure. His method is to show that ambiguity results in a number of alternate readings of the text, which taken together cast additional light on the example text.

Not sure how valid this is today, but it seems to have influenced critical thinking at the time of its initial publication, and prompted an ongoing discussion.

Dan says

Empson argues that ambiguity is a central device of poetry, and that it distinguishes poetry from other forms of writing. For him, writers such as William Shakespeare, Alexander Pope and John Donne regularly employed the ambiguities of sense and syntax as a way of giving expression to highly complex ideas. Most of the book is analysis of examples as Empson supplies multiple readings of words and phrases from various poems in order both to define the different types of ambiguity and to substantiate his assertion that ambiguity is a significant literary device. For some, Empson's close readings may seem like an instance of reading too much or too deeply into the poems; for me, though, the level of attention Empson gives to the language of the poems he analyzes is appropriate, particularly as he is discussing the work of writers who were intensely word-conscious (and insofar as Empson is trying to prove that ambiguity is a dominant device in English poetry, he really cannot avoid reading rather closely the poetry he discusses simply in order to make his point).

In addition to analysis, the book includes discussions on more theoretical and philosophical levels. In the first chapter, in a great show of reasoning, Empson defends his assertion that ambiguity is a significant poetic device; this is followed by a discussion of the relation between sound and sense in poetry. In his discussion of the seventh type of ambiguity, Empson employs the discourses both of psychoanalysis and of symbolic logic, and in his conclusion he distinguishes between the appreciation and the analysis as two dominant forms of poetic criticism.

Timothy says

I found this book to contain much sensitive analysis and a pleasant style, but I traversed it with the sense that I lacked the patience and refinement to take much away from it. Ultimately, the ending cheered me and serves as a better review than anything I could write:

"I should claim, then, that for those who find this book contains novelties, it will make poetry more beautiful, without their ever having to remember the novelties, or endeavor to apply them. It seems a sufficient apology for many niggling pages."

R.K. Cowles says

3 1/2 stars

Katherine says

noooo restringe, antes bien, ilumina, detona, invita #chimbita
SI EL ANALISTA CONQUISTÓ EL PAÍS, AÚN NO LO GOBIERNA...

dv says

Letto rapidamente, soprattutto senza le necessarie conoscenze della poesia inglese qui usata come base per la dissertazione. A ogni modo, estremamente utile da (qualsiasi) punto di vista narrativo la riflessione di Empson sul concetto di ambiguità come strumento del racconto.

J.W. Dionysius Nicolello says

Poetically technical (or technically poetic) masturbation is still masturbation. And masturbating can condemn a man to hairy palms, sheer blindness, or even in some more incredible cases, Eternal Hell. All of this sounds horrifying and I want nothing to do with it!

Laurence Thompson says

Reading Empson, who was only 24 when he wrote Seven Types, can be like encountering Sherlock Holmes amid one of his inductive spiels. The experience is amazing, bewildering, enlightening, intimidating, funny, and stupefying all at once. How does the detective conclude, as Empson does on page 178, that by "the ghosts of beauty glide/And haunt the places where their honour died" Pope intended to leave the door open to three pregnant prose paragraphs of potential meaning? Elementary: Empson has pre-empted the Derridean

suspicion that there can be no meaning without the possibility of it being mistaken. That poetic language, its brevity necessitated by metre, is obliged to hold innumerable ambiguities within finite space.

As he grows more sure of himself, Empson becomes more irreverent. (Both in his arguments and, if you have a later edition, his footnotes defending his thesis from other critics since 1930.) The result is an improving book, which Empson ended a finer critic than he started, ready to take his place alongside Johnson and Hazlitt as one of the best critics of English poetry "not least," as Jonathan Bate pointed out, "because they were the funniest."

Steven says

Although many of the examples from 15-19th century poetry that Empson analyses seems hopelessly dated—it always amazes me that the Romantics were that romantic—his close attention to words and their various meanings is a good wake-up call. A reminder to pay closer attention to word choice. I won't pretend that I studied this book that closely, but I have found it great for browsing. Just picking up it up and reading a dozen pages, thinking about the multifaceted ways that words can be used. Already, though, Empson's work has given me a more sophisticated sense of what constitutes ambiguity and how it can be created (my sense of ambiguity was less broad than the seven types he offers). It also makes me ponder whether certain passages are ambiguous or merely poorly communicated. Or whether ambiguity exists because of an author's intent or by what the reader brings to the words. In the latter case ambiguity is easy enough to produce by using loaded words ("loaded" here is a good example of what I mean). An author may have a clear meaning in mind, but can count on readers heading in many directions regardless.

Kent says

I can't help but comment on this in light of the push against Tony Hoagland's argument about the "skittery poem of the moment." While I can admit my own exhaustion with poems that seem interested in using a limited bag of tricks (and tricks here intended in a pejorative sense), I think there are times when Hoagland doesn't honor the poems he criticizes with the ambiguous intent that is inherent in any good poem. That may be why this book by Empson resonates with me--because it advocates vagueness in poetry, and because it insists on the active engagement when a person reads poems.

The Literary Chick says

Originally purchased after reading a short story by Shirley Jackson about a character's ambiguous action to something said, this book became something I was determined to read through. Fascinating, mentally stimulating, and engrossing, even if you have to chain yourself to a wall to read it. Best comprehended reading in a windowless room, devoid of all but a desk, chair, and lamp, for uninterrupted 3 hour intervals.

Tad Richards says

Still dense, still hard to tell exactly what separates one type from another, still brilliant.

Mahmoud Keshk says

This book is invaluable for any scholar who is pursuing a serious study of poetry. It is a must-read.

Mike Gowan says

I recall that I got this book because it was referred to (and summarized) in Lewis Turco's book "The New Book of Forms." It has been on my shelf for years. I pulled it down and found where I stopped reading on page 78.

This is about half the way through the second type of ambiguity where two or more meanings are resolved into one. That type of ambiguity is the most fun to try to work with in a sonnet form, for me, anyway, so I think I got what I needed from the book.

But looking at it again, now for the review. I get the idea that the best books are books you can swallow whole then cough up later for some extra chewing over. That's why I liked it, but did not love it.

Thaisa Frank says

This is a wonderful book for the writer who is interested in the nuances of language and words. Empson wrote this book in 1930 and it has the somewhat antiquated, detailed, self-referential, hesitant, over-explaining style of a British academic (although Empson was American) who probably started to read the classics at a young age. (In some ways his tone reminds me of the British language philosophers and empiricists of the 40s onward.)

Empson believes that the richness of ambiguity belongs to poetry alone.

And--as a voice-driven fiction writer--I can't agree with this. There are many instances in which words in a good piece of fiction have layered and contradictory resonance although it's a great challenge to accomplish this within the structure of narrative. Nonetheless, it's poetry Empson was drawn to--and he probably didn't spend a lot of time on writers like Flaubert or Proust because he wasn't as interested in fiction.

Empson mentions a lot of classics and while I didn't know all of them I knew enough to get around and was already aware of the topics covered in this book. Because of my own work and particular interests as a writer at this point, the book didn't quite call to me.

Still, it's a detailed, servicable book by a thorough and creative mind and a wonderful introduction to the nuances of language. Although I think that writers generally learn more about the harmonics of language themselves in the sheer effort of writing and making mistakes, this might be the sort of book that a writer puts away and allows to ripen during dreams. There is a lot of value about valence, harmonics, paradox, and the relationship between sound and meaning.

I would recommend this to anyone who is interested in the nuances of language.

