

Meanings Beyond the Words: The Study of Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity in Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Hassin ur Rehman, Hafiz Imran Nawaz, Nazra Zahid Shaikh

Senior Lecturers, Department of English, Hamdard University, Pakistan

Abstract

This study circles around the Seven Types of Ambiguities by William Empson in Robert Frost's poem Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evenings. The researcher explores all these ambiguities to highlight various meanings of the poem. The poem has verbal ambiguity which is related to the pause or stay in the woods. Semantic ambiguity is there in the sense of woods as a forest or actual woods. The short sentences, continuity of meaning in stanzas (enjambment), and different structures point towards the Syntactic ambiguity. The speaker lingers or is trapped between the responsibilities of life and the serenity (peace) of the woods which presents Tonal ambiguity. The Contextual ambiguity showcases in the realm of day and night or winter season and eternity. The poem's meanings in regard to social, emotional, psychological, and philosophical ground clearly mention Full ambiguity. Conclusively, the poem offers uniqueness in diverse meanings through these ambiguities according to the readers' state of mind. The researcher analyzes other research articles, books, and documents to support the topic under study.

Keywords: William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguities, verbal and semantic Ambiguities, syntactic and tonal Ambiguities, psychological and philosophical grounds,

Introduction

Robert Frost is very famous and appreciated for his poetry around the world. His poetry has been criticized by many scholars to get the possible meanings of his poetry. Every researcher has somehow interpreted his poetry according to their own understanding of the meanings. His poetry portrays natural aspects from different perspectives and now these aspects have multiple meanings in different eras. This is truly a remarkable reflection of his intelligence and imaginative power. He is considered to be as important as Wordsworth from the Romantic era, blending the fragments of modernism, history, nature, and culture (Faggen, 2014).

Frost' poetry usually offers two meanings or points of view using figurative language and literary devices. The poet did not provide any clue regarding the meanings which he wanted to convey. He suggested this scenario for the sake of education and various aspects of human life. He played with language while the scholar decoded the interpretations of his poems according to their level of understanding and purpose (Selvi & Malar, 2021).

Robert Frost's poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* has similar ground where the meanings cannot be determined or there are no determinate meanings of this poem. He utilized different figurative languages such as paradox, ambiguity, irony, etc. in this poem. It embodies the paradoxical essence of human experience, suspended between lucidity, and obscurity (Husaini & Dewi, 2021).

The work of William Empson (1953) highlights the importance of ambiguity in creating complex and layered meanings in poetry. He argues that ambiguity allows poets to convey multiple ideas, emotions, and attitudes simultaneously, enriching the reader's experience.

Framework

The researcher uses *Seven Types of Ambiguity* by William Empson (1953) in Robert Frost poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* as a framework to comprehend the usage of various sorts of ambiguity. The theory confers the following seven types of ambiguity.

1. Verbal ambiguity: Words or phrases with multiple meanings.
2. Semantic ambiguity: Ambiguity arising from the relationships between words.
3. Syntactical ambiguity: Ambiguity in sentence structure or grammar.
4. Tonal ambiguity: Ambiguity in the poet's tone or attitude.
5. Contextual ambiguity: Ambiguity arising from the poem's context or situation.
6. Mood ambiguity: Ambiguity in the poet's emotional state or mood.
7. Full ambiguity: Ambiguity that encompasses multiple levels of meaning.

Research Questions

How does the poetry of Frost explore the ambiguities of Empson?

How do these ambiguities manipulate the meanings of the poem?

Literature Review

Seven Types of Ambiguity by Empson is one of the well-known literary books which few have heard and read. Empson was somehow associated with the New Criticism as well because partially both theories have similar outcomes. These seven types could easily be applied to poetry rather than any other genre. Still these seven types of ambiguities have a huge scope as few theories did not maintain their existence in the field of literary theory or in the field of their application (Strier, 2023).

The book *Seven Types of Ambiguities* by Empson has been very effective in multiple ways. It depicts words playing along with different meanings at different time frames. These ambiguities were once identified as 'ornamental' because of their fundamental situations or usages. These seven types were discussed separately in different chapters. The meanings became ambiguous due to situation, contradictory ideas, semantics, context and mood. All these ambiguities were created by the human mind and text became the base as proof with examples (Hayes, 1971).

Robert Frost's poems are very much related to the study of nature. Through nature, Frost conveys meanings and value of life along with the importance of humanity. These aspects of his poetry

offer his hidden voice, inner mind, and conflict and harmony. He also talks about the identity of everything and everyone including the concept of nature and human life (Dahal, 2013). He uses symbols too for the in-depth and surface meanings. The study focuses on Frost's poem 'Road Not Taken' to find out meanings between lines, surface, and philosophical meanings. It further goes to tell about the symbol of path which describes walk or passage of time or life. Path of life showcases art work that exists inside the words of poetry using language and later gives meaning (Girsang et al., 2023).

Pambudi and Maryadi (2016) search for the implied meanings in Frost poetry through figurative language. They express that there are six types of figures of speech like symbol, hyperbole, personification, metaphor, irony, and apostrophe. He applied the theory of Lawrence Perrine for figurative languages. These figurative language give meaning to Frost poetry such as stylistic, social, connotative, conceptual and affective meanings. All these figurative languages create possible meanings in Frost poems.

Research Methodology

The researcher used a textual analysis method along with a close reading tool to analyze Robert Frost's poem 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' from the lens of Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguities. This study explores the impact of these ambiguities on the meaning of the poem.

Textual Analysis

This section deals with the text of the poem Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening for Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity to focus on social, psychological, philosophical, and emotional aspects of meanings.

Verbal Ambiguity: The Polysemous 'Stopping'

The poem's opening line, 'Whose woods these are I think I know', introduces the first ambiguity. The word 'stopping' can be interpreted as both 'halting' and 'pausing', setting the tone for a particular exploration of the speaker's intentions.

The speaker's intention is ambiguous: either he wants to pause there for a while or he wants to stay to enjoy the weather of the woods. This gives a different meaning of the poem when the word 'stop' is brought to the consideration.

Semantic Ambiguity: The Woods as Liminal Space

The relationship between 'woods' and 'snowy evening' creates a rich and evocative atmosphere. The woods, a liminal space between civilization and wilderness, embody the speaker's ambivalence towards the attraction of nature and the comfort of human connection.

The word 'woods' offers a confusion in a signified perception as this word has two different meanings. The first one is related to the forest and the other meaning is somehow presenting the actual woods. due to these possible meanings in the woods create ambiguity in meaning.

Syntactical Ambiguity: The Deliberate Sentence Structure

Frost's simple, yet deliberate, sentence structure contributes to the poem's ambiguity. The use of short sentences and enjambment creates a sense of flow mirroring the speaker's gentle journey into the woods.

The continuity of meanings in next stanzas along with short sentences and unique structures establish confusion in meaning. This confusion is called syntactical ambiguity as the meaning cannot be taken completely until the entire poem is read.

Tonal Ambiguity: The Speaker's Enigmatic Tone

The speaker's tone, oscillating between contemplation and detachment, invites the reader to engage with the poem's emotional complexity. This tonal ambiguity underscores the speaker's ambivalence towards the woods and their symbolic significance.

The snowy evening's temporal liminality heightens the speaker's self-analysis navigating life's journey and terminus. The speaker's emotional state, poised between serenity and melancholy, creates a mood of ambiguity resonating deeply with the reader. The speaker is somehow trapped between the peace of the woods and personal struggles of life.

Full Ambiguity: The Woods as Multivalent Symbol

The woods symbolize multiple layers of meaning, encompassing emotional, social, psychological, and philosophical states. This full ambiguity invites the reader to untangle the poem's complexity uncovering new meanings with each successive reading.

The meaning is not clear in regards to its social, psychological, philosophical, and emotional grounds. This confusion is called full ambiguity where the entire meaning of the text is unclear.

Contextual Ambiguity: The Snowy Evening as Temporal Liminality

The 'snowy evening' serves as a temporal liminal space suspended between day and night or winter and eternity. This contextual ambiguity heightens the speaker's introspection as they navigate the brink between life's journey and its limitation. The contextual ambiguity showcases in the realm of day and night or winter season and eternity where the meaning is not showcased in regard to its context.

Mood Ambiguity: The Speaker's Emotional State

The speaker's emotional state, poised between serenity and melancholy, creates a mood ambiguity that resonates deeply with the reader. This emotional complexity underscores the speaker's

profound connection with the natural world. When the speaker's inner feeling is not visible in the poem, it for sure leads to confusion because the mood of the speaker is still hidden and nobody exactly knows what the speaker wants while standing in the woods. This confusion of meaning is called mood ambiguity.

Above all, Frost poetry has many directions where the theory of Empson can easily find its way. These ambiguities provide rich, in-depth, and complex meanings to the poetry of Frost.

Conclusion

This exploration offers multipart meanings of Frost's masterpiece guided by William Empson's seminal framework, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. The poem has a rich floor for finding diverse meanings due to ambiguities. It has verbal ambiguity where the speaker wants to stay or pause for a while in the woods. It also has semantic ambiguity where woods define a place between civilization and forest that lead the speaker to linger between day and night. Syntactical ambiguity has also been discussed in the form of short sentences and enjambment through stanzas. Tonal ambiguity can also be explored as the speaker is trapped between the peace of woods and his ambivalence towards his life struggles. Contextual ambiguity is presented through winter and eternity or day and night. Overall the poem is full of ambiguity as it has different senses or meanings related to psychological, social, emotional, and philosophical ground. All these ambiguities create uniqueness in the poem of Robert Frost from multiple perspectives.

References

- Dahal, P. S. (2013). The World of Nature and Human Experience in the Poetry of Robert Frost. *International Journal of English and Literature (IJEL)*, 6(6), 99.
- Empson, W. (1953). *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. William Empson. Chatto and Windus.
- Faggen, R. (2014). Robert Frost. *A Companion to Modernist Poetry*, 358-366.
- Frost, R. (1978). *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*. Irwin Limited.
- Girsang, M., Situmorang, L. N., Situngkir, D. C., Elpride, I., & Simangunsong, Y. V. (2023). Symbolic Meanings In The Road Not Taken Poetry By Robert Frost. *Journal on Education*, 5(3), 9665-9671.
- Hayes, R. A. (1971). *A Test of Empson's Ambiguities* (Doctoral dissertation, Fresno State College).
- Husaini, N., & Dewi, S. L. (2021). An analysis of figurative languages on Robert Frost poems *The Road Not Taken* and *Stopping By Woods on A Snowy Evening*: A reflection of American culture in general. *Journal of English Education and Social Science*, 1(1), 1-12.
- Pambudi, R. T., & Maryadi, M. A. (2016). *Figurative language used in Robert Frost's poems* (Doctoral dissertation, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta).
- Strier, R. (2023). New Impressions XX *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. *Essays in Criticism*, 73(1), 95-120.

- Selvi, M. T., & Malar, D. A. A. (2021). A critical analysis of Robert Frost poems. *Journal of Language and Linguistics in Society (JLLS)* ISSN, 2815-0961.