

## Seventh Type of Ambiguity by William Empson

The word 'ambiguity' means a single word having more than one indeterminate meaning. Empson's "Seven Types of Ambiguity" presents the different kinds of ambiguity or types of logical disorder in the order of increasing distance from simple statement and logical exposition. They are:

- 1) Metaphor, that is, when two things are said to be alike which have different properties. This concept is similar to that of metaphysical conceit.
- 2) Two or more meanings are resolved into one. Empson considers this as using two different metaphors.
- 3) Two ideas that are connected through context can be given in one word simultaneously which is otherwise called pun.
- 4) Two or more meanings that do not agree but combine to make clear a complicated state of mind in the author (abstract thoughts).
- 5) When the author discovers his idea in the act of writing. Empson describes a simile that lies halfway between two statements made by the author.
- 6) When a statement says nothing and the readers are forced to invent a statement of their own, most likely in conflict with that of the author (concrete thought).
- 7) Two words that within context are opposites that expose a fundamental division in the author's mind.

Gerard Manley Hopkins' "The Windhover to Christ the Lord" conveys the indecision in the mind of the author about God and Nature. The octave describes the flight of the bird and in the sestet there are two parts. The first part is about the description of the bird and the bird is compared with Christ. The next part of the sestet is about his memories and appreciation for Christ. There are contradictory ideas in the poem. The description of the bird's flight is extremely beautiful which refers to Nature, whereas, the greatness of Jesus Christ which is beyond description refers to religion. There is a reference to the active physical beauty of the bird versus the poet's patient spiritual renunciation. In other words, contradictory ideas are the bird's life of action and the poet's decision to opt for the life of meditation. So the poet's action becomes inaction. He sacrifices his works by burning his works in fire when he becomes a Jesuit.

The other contradictions in the poem are reference to the word "buckles" which refers to get ready (to become more spiritual) and to prevent action (of writing poetry) The words used for both these actions are conflicting. There occurs an action of total surrender for the sake of the life of meditation, just like his master Jesus Christ. There are multiple and simultaneous meanings in the poem. The essential aspect of New Criticism is ambiguity. The word "sillion" refers to the furrow in the ground or furrowing the heart. The other contradictory words are "fire" and "ash." The gold colour the painter paint as haloes are beautiful, but only due to "gash" (wound) and "gall" (pain), "vermillion" (blood) through Jesus' crucifixion redemption of the world is possible.

Hopkins, here turns the beauty of the bird to an image of a humble labour. The plough shines as it travels through the furrow. The dying coal splits up to reveal the hot centre. By this, he means to say that Christ's life shines out in spite of its lack of earthly

success. By using the particular words thus Empson brings out the bird imagery to relate the spiritual development and changes in the poet's mind.

Empson interprets George Herbert's "The Sacrifice" as a poem having conflicts though the business of this doctrinal poem is to state a generalised solution of them. The speaker in this poem is Jesus Christ. As interpreted by Empson, the speaker is speaking with pathetic simplicity, an innocent surprise that people should treat him so, and a complete failure to understand the case against him:

They did accuse me of great villainy  
That I did thrust into the Deitie;  
Who never thought that cry robberie;  
Was ever grief like mine?

In these lines the accusation of the 'Deitie' to a 'robber' is contradictory.

Again, Empson refers in "The Sacrifice," about the division in the author's mind – between reaction against the cruelty of crucifixion and the acceptance of Christ's death as a sweet sacrifice, combining the supreme act of sin with the supreme act of virtue. With reference to the following lines:

Some said that I the temple to the floore  
In three days razed, and raised as before.  
What, he that built the world can do much more.  
Was ever grief like mine?

the words "razed" and "raised" are ambiguous. These words may be considered in different ways. In one way, we can say that "razed" means destroying the church; in another way, we can say that "raised" means building up the church. Herbert here uses opposite words, but it is more effective. Herbert may also mean by "raising" God's resurrection from death.

Moreover, this is a quotation from Jeremiah which refers to the wicked city of Jerusalem, abandoned by God for her sins and not to the Saviour. There is a fusion of love of Christ and the vindictive terrors of the sacrificial idea in his advice to his dear friends not to weep for him, for, because he has wept for both, they will need their tears for themselves. (In his agony, they abandoned him):

Weep not dear friends, since I for both have wept  
When all my tears were blood, the while you slept  
Your tears for your own fortunes should be kept  
Was ever grief like mine?

The stress of the main meaning is on the loving – kindness of Jesus. This verse contains as strong and simple a double meaning. As per the evaluation of Empson, in this verse, Christ's wish is that his own grief may never be exceeded among the humanity he pities. Empson gives this double meaning though it may sound blasphemous. A memory of the revengeful power of Jehova gives resonance to the voice of the merciful power of Jesus:

‘Herod in judgement sits, while I do stand  
Examines me with a censorious hand’.

‘me’ is made to ring out with a triumphant and scornful arrogance. It implies that he will be far more furious in his judgement than his judges.

Empson quotes a few more stanzas from George Herbert’s doctrinal poem and brings out the conflicts and contradictions in the poem. He quotes specific examples from the poem to prove that the supreme act of sin is combined with the supreme act of virtue in the person of Christ. The final contradiction presented is found in the lines :

‘Lo here I hand, charged with a world of sin  
The greater world of the two . . .  
as the complete Christ; scapegoat and tragic hero;  
loved because hated; hated because god like;  
freeing from torture because tortured;  
and torturing because merciful.

While reading “The Sacrifice” one has to choose between Herbert’s words and Christ’s words because it juxtaposes both a human and a divine meaning. Christ’s story asserts authority and refers to the worth of passion. Human language requires thoughtful contemplation. For Herbert, every word in the poem becomes a reflection and thereby it becomes ambiguous.

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