

William Empson

Seven Types of Ambiguity is a work of literary criticism by William Empson, first published in 1930. It was one of the most influential critical works of the 20th century and was a key foundation work in the formation of the New Criticism school.

The book is organized around seven types of ambiguity that Empson finds in the poetry he discusses. The second edition (revised) was published by Chatto & Windus, London, 1947, and there was another revised edition in 1953. The first printing in America was by New Directions in 1947.

Seven Types of Ambiguity ushered in New Criticism in the United States. The book is a guide to a style of literary criticism practiced by Empson. An ambiguity is represented as a puzzle to Empson. We have ambiguity when "alternative views might be taken without sheer misreading." Empson reads poetry as an exploration of conflicts within the author.

Seven types

1. The first type of ambiguity is the metaphor, that is, when two things are said to be alike which have different properties. This concept is similar to that of metaphysical conceit.

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
- T S Eliot

2. Two or more meanings are resolved into one. Empson characterizes this as using two different metaphors at once.

Those were my places: the weed-run garden, the other twelve rooms, and the arctic upstairs, lifeless like a museum or a film set; a perfect timepiece, fallen into quiet and fascinating ruin.

- Jenny Valentine

3. Two ideas that are connected through context can be given in one word simultaneously.

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods **his weary way**,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.
- Thomas Gray

4. Two or more meanings that do not agree but combine to make clear a complicated state of mind in the author.

Twilight vs. gaudhooli

5. When the "author is discovering his idea in the act of writing..." Empson describes a simile that lies halfway between two statements made by the author.

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove;
A maid whom there were none to praise,
And very few to love.

**A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye!
- Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.**

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and O
The difference to me!

- William Wordsworth

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.

What dire offence from am'rous causes springs,
What mighty contests rise from trivial things,
I sing — This verse to Caryl, Muse! is due:
This, ev'n Belinda may vouchsafe to view:
Slight is the subject, but not so the praise,
If She inspire, and He approve my lays.

Say what strange motive, Goddess! could compel
A well-bred Lord t' assault a gentle Belle?
O say what stranger cause, yet unexplor'd,
Could make a gentle Belle reject a Lord?
In tasks so bold, can little men engage,
And in soft bosoms dwells such mighty Rage?

- Alexander Pope

7. Two words that within context are opposites that expose a fundamental division in the author's mind.

A terrible beauty is born

- William Butler Yeats

Archetypal Criticism

Northrop Frye: *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957)

The Cycle of Mythoi

Mythos is the Greek word (Aristotle's favored word) for "story" or "plot." Frye divides stories into four categories or parts of the Cycle of Mythoi: comedy (the mythos of spring), romance (the mythos of summer), tragedy (the mythos of autumn), and irony/satire (the mythos of winter). It's easy to see that there's something spring-like about the progress of a comedic protagonist from a bad (cold) state to a better (warmer) one, and the converse is true of autumn and tragedy. But Frye isn't just drawing an analogy. He's saying that at base our conceptions of plot—the shapes human lives can take when we express them in language—are drawn from the processes of the natural world. The turning of the seasons, the decay of the body, the return of plant and animal life from dormant hibernation: Nature is the mother of metaphor and story.

Again, Frye seems to be fighting against a conception of Literature that would bring individual works of literature out of contact with one another. If the natural world is the source of all stories, then all human stories have the same source. The biggest changes in story have come with the shifting of our understanding of nature, from a holistic world of spirits and prime elements to the world we live in now, where we can crash atoms into one another and look at what falls out. Only these changes can produce a change at the very heart of metaphor. As before with law and religion, Frye now puts literature in contact with science.

Joseph Campbell: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949)

