

CHAPTER : I

AMBIGUITY OF THE FIRST TYPE

Empson defines the first type of ambiguity as " The fundamental situation, whether it deserves to be called ambiguous or not, is that a word or a grammatical structure is effective in several ways at once ".<sup>1</sup> Here he considers 'a word' or 'a grammatical structure' that gives different meanings to the statement; and because of that specific word or structure various meanings are possible and to this we call ambiguous. This makes us to think about the meaning in different way, where several interpretations are possible.

Empson begins his discussion of this type with the classic example from Shakespearean sonnet

' Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang '

Empson in his fairly long analysis points out how the single line makes different interpretations possible. Here he points out different relations. The different comparisons, that produce alternative reactions in the mind of reader. The plain meaning of the line can be stated as in the ruined monastery choirs sang, where once upon a time birds used to sing sweet songs. Empson

considers this line in a very different fashion. The situation of the monastery, grey walls, coloured and carved wood architecture. Not only this but how Shakspeare's feelings were related with that of choir boys and sociological and historical reasons behind the feelings, destruction of monastery by protestants and fear of puritanism. After giving all these possible meanings Empson writes, " There is a sort of ambiguity in not knowing which of these to hold most clearly in the mind."<sup>2</sup> It clearly then indicates that the line is ambiguous and various interpretations are possible here. This requires close reading and ingenious study. While commenting on this analysis of Empson S.E.Hyman points out that Empson reads the line, "with the whole corpus of biographical and literary references suspended in his mind."<sup>3</sup> Ambiguity works here not as deficiency poetry but it comes as virtue or the strength of poetry; at the same time it comes naturally and hence simile in the sonnet expresses beauty.

The following two lines of chinese poem translated by Mr. Waley are given to illustrate the first type of ambiguity.

Swiftly the years beyond recall  
Solemn the stillness of this spring morning.

The years those pass away swiftly are difficult to recall. When one reflects on those bygone days on one spring morning which is calm and quiet. Empson conceives here two main scales to measure the time 'the large one takes the length of a human life as its unit' and 'the small one takes as its unit the conscious moment'. These two time scales are suggested by the two words 'swift' and 'still' and hence Empson calls these two words as ambiguous. Because years in the man's life seem swift, even on the small scale, morning seems still even on the large scale. As the words are contradictory they demand to be conceived in different ways. Even Empson admits that there is neither rhyme, nor metre or any overt device like comparison and still these two lines due to their compactness force the reader to conceive their relation for himself.<sup>4</sup>

Metaphor, rhyme and irony are the literary devices generally used to embellish the literary language. Empson includes them in his 'first type' Metaphors as Empson states 'effective from several

points of view', he includes them in this type commenting that "all languages are composed of dead metaphors as the soil of corpses, but English is perhaps uniquely full of metaphors of this sort, which are not dead but sleeping, and while making a direct statement, colour it with an implied comparison".<sup>5</sup> Metaphor is an implied analogy, which imaginatively identifies one thing with another. It is trope in which author turns or twists the meaning of the word. I. A. Richards is of the opinion that, "When we use metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word or phrase whose meaning is resultant and their interaction".<sup>6</sup> By quoting Dr. Johnson he points out that metaphorical expression is a great excellence in style, when it is used, it gives you two ideas for one. To these two ideas Richards suggests two words 'tenor' and 'vehicle'. The 'tenor' is the underlying idea or principal subject which a 'vehicle or a figure means. The following example which Empson calls subdued metaphor is illustrative of this type.

Beauty is but a flower  
 Which wrinkles will devour.  
 Brightness falls from the air.  
 Queens have died young and fair.  
 Dust hath closed Helen's eye.  
 I am sick, I must die.  
 Lord have mercy upon us.

- NASH, Summer's Last Will and Testament

The lines suggest the plain meaning - what ever is beautiful, is short-lived and that vanishes so soon like the brightness that falls from the sky for the brief span of time. Like queen Helen who died - untimely. Whenever I think this I became so uneasy that I feel it is better to die than to live in such a desperate condition. At last the speaker in the poem prays for mercy to the God.

Empson interpretes these lines and points out that the word devour means 'remove' or 'replace' with no overtone of cruelty and the unnatural. Here it is a subdued metaphor, as Empson writes 'beauty is but a flower/which wrinkles will devour! That comparison here makes us to conceive the meaning in different ways. As flowers wither so also beauty will wither one day or other. But Empson here points out many things that a word 'devour' suggests - long curving wrinkles on the face of rodent ulcers, caterpillars on the petals. Further Empson Conceives that devour suggests the worm that are to gnaw it in the grave. Though this is grave and serious or rather strange for modern readers, Empson states that Elizabethans were used to employ such comparisons.<sup>7</sup>

" Brightness Falls from the air "

This line is the example of ambiguity of vagueness as Empson writes. He interpretes the line in various ways - there are variety of things the line may be about, passing of the setting sun, moon and the period of their shining, there are stars falling at odd times, taking the brightness as abstract, not as meaning something bright, it is as a benefit that brightness falls diffusely reflected from the sky. Further it suggests the threat of the thunder "All is unsafe even the heavens are not sure of their brightness' or 'the qualities in the man that deserve respect are not natural to him but brief gifts from God, they fall like manna and melt as soon'." 8

'Dust hath closed Helen's eye'.

Empson points out that there is juxtaposition that connects the preceding line with this and so one can interpret these lines and the meaning of the metaphor in detail. Decaying corpse and dust gathered on eye lids; suggest that 'dust' is generated from her own corruption. There is even more terrible comparison that Empson points out " on one hand, it is the bright motes dancing in sunbeams, which fall and became dust which is dirty and infectious; on the other, the lightness, gaiety and activity of humanity, which shall come to dust in the

grave"<sup>9</sup>. Thus Empson explores all possible meanings of the metaphor. However, for ordinary reader it is very difficult to apprehend all these meanings in single act of his reading. But Empson here unveils all those possible meanings in his analysis. The way in which he conceives these meanings is very important here because while reading the poem he is always aware of all things those are connected with the poem. He is not isolating the poem from either its social or historical background and looks at it as the very distinct thing away from all those but taking all those references in his mind he interpretes the poem.

When a particular word is selected for the vivid detail a reader may suspect alternative reasons, why it has been selected. Even it is very difficult for the writer to answer this. Empson says that there may be alternative views of seeing them in order of importance.

Pan is our All, by him we breath, we live,  
 We move, we are, ....  
 But when he frowns, the sheep, alas,  
 The Shepherds wither, and the grass.

Ben Jonson ' Pan's Anniversary '

The above mentioned lines describe Pan and his nature.

The speaker in the poem says that Pan who is so beloved

of all. One feels happy in his company, but he is a person of choleric temper. That when he becomes angry not only animate but inanimate things tremble with fear.

Empson states that the choice of the word alas is important here; that one must give due attention to it, as it deserves explanation, because it belongs to sheep by proximity, and it rhymes with grass. Here three words : Sheep, grass and shepherd maintain the balance of the verse. Empson delves deep for the references of this word in Bible and points out the comparison of man's life with grass, and how it indicates three different stages in the life of a man. So the word suggests serious tone and aptly (experiences) the threat of his (Pan's) anger. Further Empson observes that "as the passage appears absurdly blasphemous, because Pan here is James I".<sup>10</sup>

This interpretation gives us various implications and states that how the balance of the verse is maintained. The first two lines of the poem focus the qualities of Pan and state that how he is near and dear to all. Where as last two lines indicate the result of his anger. The implication behind the lines is important. Due to these devices poetry seems difficult from prose; and it is true that as Empson writes : "Metrical scheme imposes a sort of intensity of interpretation upon the grammar which makes it fruitful even when there is no song".<sup>11</sup>





Ambiguity is more elaborate in poetry than in prose because there is presence of metre and rhyme. Empson gives many examples from Marlowe's Dr. Faustus and Tamburlaine. From poetry of Spencer and Sidney and shows how rhyme makes tremendous effect on the readers and force them, to conceive different meanings.

Meander : Your majesty shall shortly have your wish  
 And ride in triumph through Persepolis.  
 ( Exeunt all except Tamburlane and his followers )

Tamburlane : And ride in triumph through Persepolis  
 Is it not brave to be a King, Techelles,  
 Usuncasane and Thridamas  
 Is it not passing brave to be a King,  
 And ride in triumph through Persepolis ?

The above mentioned lines quoted from Marlowe's Tamburlane give us clear idea that how rhyme play an important part to suggest different meanings. Here Tamburlane repeats the same line again because his mind is 'glutted with astonishment at them. ' Though there is lack of variety in rhythm, Marlowe uses the same line three times and brings a charm to the whole passage. Empson observes that the single line, 'And ride in triumph' indicates three different tones such as of obsequiousness, astonishment and of triumph. Thus here the poetic effect is achieved by repeating the same line three times in the dialogue.

Empson includes dramatic irony in this type because it is effective in several ways. Dramatic irony suggests a condition in which the audience is made aware of information unknown to some of actual characters in the play; this information may involve real identity of a character, his true intentions or the possible outcome of action, because audience possesses knowledge, which characters do not, it is able to measure words and deeds against a clear standard and understanding.

The following example from Synge's play illustrates that how dramatic irony is effective in several ways.

Deirdre : Do not raise a hand to touch me  
 Conchubor : There are other hands to touch you,  
                   My fighters are set in among the trees.  
 Deirdre : Who will fight the grave Conchubor and it  
                   is opened on the dark night.

The dialogue gives us more implications of 'the night is dark' that suggests Deirdre can't be fought after she has killed herself. The threat of Conchubor and the reply given by Deirdre is more important here. Strong determination and fearlessness expressed in her defiant answer. But it is true that Deirdre could not fight against the impulses of the night at the beginning of the play, when she ran off with Naisi, nor against the weariness which is the turning point in the action and it suggests that happiness is not

ever lasting, for which they return to Ireland. Giving all these implications Empson further points out that grave suggests that as Deirdre can not fight against it, but she herself is unable to fight against the grave in which Naisi is lying. This indicates the defeat not only of Conchubor but Deirdre also, who opened the grave, whether for herself or Naisi. It is then true that after the way Conchubor has killed Naisi, Deirdre can not live hence Conchubor can not hold Deirdre from her grave. Even there is implication of threat from Deirdre that the force he has himself loosed against her will kill him.<sup>12</sup>

Dramatic irony is interesting to Empson because it gives an intelligible way in which the reader can be reminded the rest of the play while observing a single part of it. Because irony has such a force, weight and capacity that, " it gives one some means of understanding the view of a work of genius as a sort of miracle whose style carries its personality into every part of it, whose matter consists of microcosms of its form, and whose flesh has the character of the flesh of an organism ".<sup>13</sup>

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NOTES & REFERENCES.

1. William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity,  
( New York : Chatto & Windus, 1930, Reprint  
1965 ) P.2.
2. Ibid., P.2-3.
3. S.E.Hyman, The Armed Vision, (New York:1948) PP.240.
4. William Empson, Seven Types : PP.24-25.
5. Ibid., P.25.
6. I.A.Richards, The Philosophy of Rhetoric,  
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1939) P.93.
7. William Empson, Seven Types P.26.
8. Ibid., PP.26-27.
9. Ibid., P.27.
10. Ibid., P.27.
11. Ibid., P.28.
12. Ibid., PP.40-41.
13. Ibid., PP.44-45.

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