



The Power of Ambiguity in Poetry: A Literary Analysis of Selected Verses

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□ قوة الغموض في الشعر: تحليل ادبي للأبيات المختارة

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Abstract

The present paper tackles the literary function of the ambiguity technique used in poetry. It aims at defining the concept of ambiguity, specifying its elements, stating its role and importance in poetry, and finding to which distance it can convey the poet's intention in his poem to the recipient. To achieve the above-mentioned aims, the paper chooses different verses from various poems written by several poets and from different ages. This is to show that ambiguity which is used by any poet, at any age, and any occasion has the same function. To fulfill the requirements in terms of literary analysis of ambiguity, the present paper follows the descriptive method. The paper is finalized by the findings as stated under the item of conclusions. **Keywords** Satire, punning, innuendo, scorning, sarcasm, humorous

المستخلص

يشير العنوان الى ان الدراسة الحالية تعالج الوظيفة الادبية لمفهوم الغموض المستخدم في الشعر. تهدف الدراسة الى تعريف مفهوم الغموض وتحديد عناصره وكذلك تبيان دور واهمية الغموض في الشعر وكذلك توضيح الى اي مدى يمكن لتكنيك اللبس قادر على اصال قصد الشاعر للمتلقي. لتحقيق الاهداف اعلاه تم اختيار نصوص شعرية مختلفة تعود لفترات زمنية مختلفة ولشعراء مختلفين من عصور مختلفة. هذا لتبين الدراسة ان مفهوم الغموض هو نفسه وله نفس الوظيفة على اختلاف المناسبات واختلاف الشعراء واختلاف احقابهم الزمنية. اتبعت الدراسة الحالية المنهج الوصفي لإنجاز المتطلبات البحثية من ناحية التحليل الادبي لمفهوم اللبس. توصلت الدراسة الى استنتاجات مختلفة وتم ذكرها في فقرة الاستنتاجات.

1. **Introduction** Linguistically, Empson (1979:232) argues that ambiguity is considered an error or a defect in using the language. Whereas in literature, the poets employ this linguistic defect (namely ambiguity) to be used as a poetic device to motivate the reader to think about more than one meaning the expression carries and to add the factors of pleasure as well. In other words, poets tend to poetize their poems with an intended ambiguous expression that bears the possibility of exciting the reader\listener to think about more than one interpretation. This is to focus a certain idea\mood and to make the reader\listener thinks deeply about it with

some pleasure. Hence, it may be said that ambiguity is used to enrich the language of the poem, on the one hand, and to add a color of complexity that expands the meaning of the literary expression, on the other hand. Empson (1979:232) adds that the use of ambiguity in poetry is to enhance the understanding of the poem. This can be achieved cognitively by shifting the linguistic response of the literary expression into emotional response. Adams (1963:184) confirms this idea by arguing that ambiguity in poetry is not a linguistic defect, because in poetry the intentional ambiguity contributes in creating an intentional sense or effect with the reader. Whereas the unintentional ambiguity appearing in any poem is considered a weakness that denotes the poor performance of the poet. In other words, ambiguity which is randomly manifested in the poem and on no base or for no purpose is considered an element of weakness, making it nonsensical. Conversely, the deliberate and carefully designed ambiguity provides the poem with strength presenting broad areas of interpretation based on extra ideas. In the same sense, Korg (1965:32) argues that the use of ambiguity in poetry is to create an interesting and thoughtful piece of literary art. He resembles the skillful poet to the skillful sculptor when he shapes the stone into a meaningful monument by using some sharp equipment. Again, he resembles the poet to the painter who creates a speaking painting by using a piece of canvas, colors, and brush. The poet achieves his aim by choosing certain words to be used in a certain way presenting an effective piece of poetry that needs deeper thinking to grasp its intended meaning. In this context, it is correct to say that the poet makes his poem alive by employing the technique of ambiguity. This can be achieved by creating different ideas, feelings, attitudes, and situations within one poetic line and maybe one word. Gurrey (1963:34) supports this idea by saying that the use of implication in the poem is of high degree of significance in terms of giving reality to the ideas and notions glittering in the mind of the reader/hearer. It is well known that the single word or the combination of words that construct a phrase or a sentence carries different meanings. In other words, there are different words express that refer to one object. Therefore, the poet has to choose the suitable word that corresponds to the occasion in order to show his skillfulness in expressing his exact intention. Actually, this work represents a real problem that faces the poet when he starts poetizing his poem. So, to achieve the exact intention by choosing a suitable word, the poet has to carefully seek the words of the language and to do his best. The success of this attempt provides the poem with its practical trait.

2. Definitions of Ambiguity

The English Language Dictionary defines the term 'ambiguity' as an expression that does not have a single clear meaning; something that is ambiguous. So, it refers to any word or expression having two or more structural descriptions because it has a doubtful or uncertain nature. The lack of uncertainty makes it difficult to be comprehended, distinguished, or even classified. Empson (1979:232) on his side defines ambiguity as the skillful use of the language that allows an alternative interpretation of the word. He states that the use of ambiguity is to keep offering a certain problem and to keep the life of the poem as well. He argues that ambiguity is not a literary theory or a method of analyzing the expression but a model of reading with pleasure. Moreover, it may be said that when ambiguity is used in poetry, it becomes a literary device serving the purpose of entertainment and pleasure. Merriam-Webster states that ambiguity is the quality of speech of being vague (ambiguous) specifically in meaning. Also, it is an expression (word or line) that can be understood/interpreted in two (or more) possible ways. In poetry, it allows several interpretations. Empson confirms this idea by saying that ambiguity is a notion related to meaning. It is the indecision of defining the meaning of the ambiguous expression. The expression refers to two different meanings. Probably one or both of the two meanings are intended; deciding the exact meaning of the expression depends on different factors including the occasion, situation, shared knowledge, stimulus of the speaker, and even the intonation of the sound (Ibid). Accordingly, it seems that linguistically, ambiguity is an adjective that signifies a word/expression having no clear meaning because it is doubtful and accepts several possible meanings or interpretations; in poetry it is a term which refers to any vagueness or mysterious expression that carries more than one meaning and bears more than one interpretation. In so, the present paper agrees with the definitions mentioned above.

3. Etymology

Latin is the origin of this word. It is derived from the stem "Ambi" which means both and around, whereas "ambiguous" means wandering and doubting. Thus, it refers to the sense of something that has a questionable nature. This word was in widespread use in French. It took the forms of "ambiguite" and "ambiguitas". "Ambiguite" indicates the meaning of hesitating and doubting, while "ambiguitas", in its general sense, refers to a word that carries more than one meaning or a case of uncertainty and indecision. English synonyms of this

word are darkness, mysteriousness, pun, innuendo, and the like. (<https://www.etymonline.com/word/ambiguity>).

4. The Significance of the Paper

It is worthy to say that poetry is of different types like narrative, descriptive, lyric, sonnet, etc. All of them are interesting for people in general and for those who concern with poetry in particular. Another thing to be said is that the poem is built on different poetic devices like structural, sense and sound devices. Ambiguity, according to the above mentioned discussion and definitions, is a quality of speech related to sense device. Since the present study tackles the concept of ambiguity or uncertainty technique used in poetry, the scope of its significance can be stated as follows:

- 1- this paper is significant for those who are interested in poetry in general and in ambiguous expressions in particular to know the types and the features of ambiguity,
- 2- It is also significant for those who want to know the important function\role of ambiguity in presenting the accurate intention of the poet, and
- 3- It is also significant for those who want to acquaint themselves with the elements of ambiguity which will be declared in the following analysis.

5. Literary Analysis of Ambiguity in poetry

The present paper agrees with Empson's argumentation (1979:232) in which he considers ambiguity as an error in using the formal language but in literature it is used to enrich the literary language and to add a color of complexity that expands the meaning of the literary expression. According to Scheffler (1979:18) punning, scorning, irony, humor, innuendo, sarcasm, and mystery are all elements that constitute the idea of ambiguity that add entertainment to the piece of writing. Hillyer (1960:51) adds points that satire is also one element of ambiguity. He adds that this element rises in the mind of reader\listener a hint to refer to some implications. In this sense, satire and the other elements work as motivations to motivate the reader to think about more than one interpretation or suggestion the expression carries. In other words, by using these elements (or one of them), the professional poet surely wants to convey a certain sense or to reach a certain mood to empower and enrich his poem in terms of presenting accurate intention, attitude, or idea Not away from the context, the present paper sees that even though the term ambiguity is considered a defect in language use and usage, yet in poetry, it is a healthy poetic phenomenon and with different functions mainly as an entertainment factor. In addition to this function, it is used as a technique that makes the reader stick to read and to think and imagine. It makes the reader reconsider what he is reading as if he is in a hypothetical world. Moreover, the present paper sees that a poem with ambiguity technique is always fresh and vital. This is because it yields new ideas every time it is read. In other words, by using ambiguity, the poet wants the reader to think and rethink, to imagine and reimagine, and to make new associations about the subject of the poem. To support this point, the present paper presents an example from the eighteenth century. It may be said that a best example of **satire accompanied with punning, humor, and scorning** maybe found in the poetry of Alexander Pope (1688-1744) who is described as the best poet who wickedly stings his enemies in his poetry. His short poem "**The Dog's Collar**" (1738) may represent a good sample for satire and pun. It happened that Alexander Pope gave a dog to Frederick (The Prince of Wales). The dog was with a collar. Pope engraved on the dog's collar the following words: "I am His Highness' dog at Kew; Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?" To decide the exact meaning of the above couplet, one should know precisely the background of the relationship between the Prince and Pope, the situation, and the opportunity that made Alexander Pope engraved this phrase on the dog's collar. These are the new associations the present paper talks about. However, this epigram is strongly considered in the satiric field. It is clear that Pope enchants and insults the prince in a satirical form. This may be interpreted on the base that says the dog is a follower though it is used for protection or for amusement. For those who know Alexander Pope and his interest in dogs may say something related to sentiment rather than satire. This confusion may take place because Pope is skillful in doing both simultaneously (namely satire and sentiment). In the same context, Damon (1965: x) argues that ambiguity may contribute to finding the coherence and unity of the poem. He adds, it is by using this technique, the poet evokes the imaginative faculty of the reader\listener and to stimulate his mind to think deeply with the expression. This is to inspire new thoughts or even to make him enter an imaginary or hypothetical world. In other words, ambiguity motivates the reader\listener to seek for various possible ideas related to the object that is described or hinted by the poet. This is because he does not get the exact meaning intended by the poet. Mostly, he tries to find the correlation between the objects of the poem. To confirm the idea of Damon (1965: x) mentioned above, the present paper

discusses an instance from the same century (namely 18th century). "A **poison Tree**" (1794) is a title of a poem by William Blake (1757-1827). The ambiguity of this expression (the title of the poem) is represented by punning and innuendo which are elements of ambiguity as stated by Scheffler (1979:18). The ambiguity here suggests the poem's unity. In other words, the title makes the reader enthusiastic to read the poem to know what may come through it because he (the reader) now constructs different ideas\questions about the poison tree. For example, does the poet speak about a real tree and a real poison or it is merely a figurative expression? If it is a real tree, then which kind of trees are intended? has this tree been planted by someone or has it has naturally grown by itself? The shape of this tree, the fruit of its leaves, and who takes care of it? Which kind of care that keeps its poison? etc. and if the title is merely a figurative expression, then what is the wisdom behind giving such a title to a piece of literary work? Who are the characters? Does the poet speak about the hatred feelings? etc However, reading the title with some contemplation, the reader finds that the ambiguity is presented in two elements which are punning and innuendo. Surprisingly, when the reader keeps reading the poem and transfers among the lines, he finds that the ambiguity lies in each line of the poem. The reader finds Blake keeping his poem alive with continuous renewal of ideas under the favor of ambiguity. However, the initial stanza of Blake's poem says: "I was angry with my friend;I told my wrath, my wrath did end.I was angry about my foe: I told it not, my wrath did grow" (ll. 1-4).Simply, the poet here informs the reader that when he "was angry" with his "friend" he told him his feelings of annoyance; this is to end the bad sense he feels towards his friend. Ironically and to the contrary, lines (3 and 4) show that when he "was angry" with his "foe" (enemy), he did not reveal his bad feeling (which grow up) to his enemy. In this sense, Blake uses the element of irony to show the power of ambiguity in making his poem alive.Anyhow, it seems that the whole stanza carries the sense of ambiguity just as the title does. This is the unity which Damon (1965: x) talks about and the present paper confirms. Here, by using ambiguity in terms of punning, innuendo, and irony one can see that both the title and the stanza are united with each other in presenting different possibilities of acceptable interpretations about the tree, poison, friend, and enemy. This is the new association the present paper talks about. The second stanza is not less adhesive to the title than the first as it is seen bellow:"And I watered it in fears,Night & morning with my tears: And I sunned it with smiles,And with soft deceitful wiles"(ll. 5-8).Blake resembles his anger to a poison tree. He says that the real tree is watered with water to grow up, while his anger is watered with fears, tears, and hatred. Then **ironically** he says that he draws a false smile in his face when he sees his enemy. He resembles this behavior to the sun light by which the real tree grows up, while by the false smile his anger and hatred grow up. The implied meaning is that he is forced to behave in such a deceitful way. Here it is important to comment that the intended use of ambiguity by William Blake gives his poem a continual life with vital sense. However, it may be said that the intentional ambiguity used in the poem is considered a status of strength and good performance.Nineteenth century poets also use ambiguity in their poems. John Clare (1793-1864) the rustic English poet presents ambiguity in terms of scorning and irony at one time in the same poem which is entitled "I Am" (1848). The poem rounds about his life. Clare creates a pessimistic situation and sad mood in terms of irony and self-scorning as he degrades and insults himself. The first stanza says:"I am - yet what I am none cares or knows;My friends forsake me like a memory lost:I am the self-consumer of my woes They rise and vanish in oblivious host,Like shadows in love's frenzied stifled throesAnd yet I am, and live-like vapours tossed" (line 1-6)In this stanza, Clare tells the reader that he is as if not existent in this life because he is cut off from his parents and family. Moreover, he is abandoned by his friends as well. They abandoned him while he was struggling with his woes. He claims that there is no one of his friends who eases the sad status he feels. He complains that his friends do not care for him. By this stanza, the poet creates a special sense in living the life. He declares the idea that he does not live his life despite the fact that he lives in this undesired world. This sense is of three dimensions: scorning, sadness, and misery. The poet motivates the reader to draw a pessimistic image of his life in which the individuals he loves abandon him and become strangers Yet, if we go back to the title of the poem, we are going to find it as "**I Am**". The hint implied behind this expression refers to greatness, pride, nobility, and so on. In other words, the title of the poem carries a hint indicating that the poem will present a person with a great personality. Ironically, and to the contrary, the stanza reveals the ambiguity the title carries in terms of irony. The stanza reveals a great doubt about his personality and about his existence in the world. The stanza shows the poet's disappointment for being left and neglected. He feels something wrong takes place and he needs someone to explain it for him. Generally, the poet presents his poem by motivating the sense of irony and self-scorn to make the reader go on reading with mystification. This is to add the element of entertainment to his poem. The use of ambiguity in this poem (in terms of scorn

and irony) allows the reader to inspire/build a third idea by presenting two conflicted ideas. In other words, the idea may be interpreted in three contrasted interoperations. The third idea/interpretation is conveyed by the use of ironical expression. The first is conveyed by using connotation by the poet. Connotation is an expression that carries a susurrate tone, which stimulates the sense of contradiction to the denotation of the same expression, which is the second idea/interpretation. Poetry of twentieth century also carries the ambiguous factor. The remarkable thing in this age is the revolution in the poetic mood. Poets are influenced by the general circumstances and also by each other. In this case, they often share a common situation. Ambiguity of this age also operates as a motivation to motivate the reader, but this time the ambiguity is illustrated in the sense of sarcasm which is another element of ambiguity as Adams (1963:184) states. Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) may be considered a good sample of this age because he is one of the most prominent English poets. He considers poetry as the main power that gives meaning to the emptiness, confusion, and mystification of the modern world in which renewal is impossible. He sheds the light on the factors that keep the continuity of life in terms of both spiritual and physical. "The Hollow Men" (1925) may represent a good example presented by Eliot in terms of sarcasm to criticize the modern life. The title itself carries the factor of ambiguity. It is a strange and exciting expression that motivates the reader to read the whole poem in order to find out what the poem is about. Moreover, the ambiguity in the title rises different questions. First of all is the indication of the word "Hollow". If it is used metaphorically to indicate empty, then the men are empty from what? And why they are empty? The first couplet of the poem says: "We are the hollow men We are the stuffed men" (ll. 1-2) The poet ascribes himself to a certain group. He says that this group is comprised hollow and baloney men. He describes these men (including himself) as "Shape without form, shade without colour" (line 11). He wants to say that they are men without identities. The poet in the first stanza shows that they are strong but useless, and they are actions but are lying using "gesture without motion" (line. 12). Metaphorically, he claims that they are stuffed and their heads are filled with nonsense; their dried voices are barely be heard and what they say is meaningless just like "wind in dry grass" (l. 8). The ambiguity in this stanza stimulates the reader to suggest different possibilities in interpreting the poet's feelings in terms of bewailing and decreasing the importance of Men. First, it is possible to say that the poet is criticizing his group (man by man) as they are incapable of doing anything against a certain situation they face. Second, it is possible to say that he is empathizing towards Man in open terms as he can present no reaction. The third possibility suggests that he is bewailing himself, as he faces a certain fate but can do nothing to save himself. In this sense, it is reasonable to comment that the poet presents a reflexive status. The ambiguity here carries a sarcasm meaning which gives a contemplative meaning. the following lines increase the sense of ambiguity under the favor of sarcasm: "Let me also wear Such deliberate disguises Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves In a field" (ll. 31-34) The poet declares that he wants to disguise by wearing a rat skin or a crow skin in order to hide himself from the eyes. In this he expresses the uselessness of his mind and strength because of his frightfulness. The following lines describe the place where he lives "In this valley of dying stars In this hollow valley" "This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms" (ll. 54-56) Again the poet speaks metaphorically. He describes the sky as it is with dead stars (dead leaders because they are away from the public). He says that he lives in a "hollow valley" (an empty place) just like his group. It seems the environment in which the poet lives has its own influence on their characteristics. These lines reflect the negative state of the Europeans in terms of culture and policy at this age especially after the First World War. The poet wants to say that the state is rejected and those who want to preserve it are empty and even they are dangerous to their society. The lines may serve as a hint for understanding the whole poem. It may remove the sense of ambiguity and may answer any question about the subject and the title of the poem. In 21st century, ambiguity is used in terms of fun and humor. For example the French Vivien Wade (1932) in her poem which is entitled "Love Might be Blind" (2012) (<https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poems/famous/funny>) tells a real humorous case in a funny style. The first stanza says: "Love might be blind, but it's not deaf Is what my dear husband has said, He claims my snoring is so loud, It's enough to wake up the dead" (lines 1-4 This stanza shows a woman who disdains herself because her husband blames himself for his unlucky marriage. She loves her husband but she can do nothing for him as he blames her for her loud snoring in the bed which wakes up the dead. Ambiguity here raises three different senses as it addresses three different characters at one time. The three senses of fun and humors are so clear; the first is on the part of the husband who feels regret and sorrowful sense because of his unlucky marriage.

The second is on the part of the wife who feels with disdain. The third is on the part of reader\listener (audience) as he feels with pleasure and delight.

6. Conclusions

From the above discussion the present paper reaches the following conclusions:

1- Ambiguity is a linguistic property rather than a poetic device. Linguistically, ambiguity is completely rejected because it is considered a defect in the writer's style. The writer should be aware to the different connotations his expression carries. Thus, clarity and transparency are inevitable features in writing formal or scientific objects to reach the intended aim. Controversially, ambiguity is often associated with poetry to achieve a certain intention or aim. It is a fundamental technique used in poetry to enrich and empower the sense of the poem.

2- Ambiguity in poetry can be taken as a means of creating a broad field of imagination, because it works on different bases like implications, denotations, and connotations that are necessary for poetizing a poem. In other words, ambiguity motivates the reader\listener seeks who for various possible ideas or suggestions related to the object that is hinted by the poet.

3- The poet may hide himself behind his attitude towards the subject to present two or more ideas at one time. In other words, the use of ambiguity is intentionally and warily used to raise the inner sense that yields different suggestions and possibilities for the sake of literary imagination and interpretation.

4- The present paper also concludes that the skillful poet often wants to convey to the reader a certain mood that makes him enthusiastic to read and reread, to think and rethink, to imagine and reimagine, and to make new associations about the subject of the poem. Ambiguity, in this sense may be considered a healthy poetic phenomenon to reach this mood.

The present paper sees that a poem with ambiguity technique is always vital and fresh. This is because it yields new ideas every time it is read. In other words, the poet keeps his poem alive with continuous renewal of ideas as the reader reads with mystification.

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