




Exploring Ambiguity as a Literary Tool in Robert Frost's Selected Poems: Insights from William Empson's Theory of Ambiguity

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: May 04, 2024

Revised: June 24, 2024

Accepted: June 25, 2024

Available Online: June 26, 2024

Keywords:

Seven Types of Ambiguity

Poetic Compositions

Multi-Layered Meanings

Reader Engagement

Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

ABSTRACT

Robert Frost's poems are well known for their abundant ambiguity, which acts as a powerful literary tool influencing various meanings. This qualitative study explores the complex and dual reading phenomenon in the context of Frost's poetry. It highlights as how ambiguity plays its crucial role in comprehending poetic compositions of Frost. This research delves deeply into poems such as "The Road Not Taken" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" in order to identify recurring themes and symbols that lend themselves to a variety of readings. The study examines the theory of ambiguity by William Empson (1930) from his book "Seven Types of Ambiguity," which discovers how ambiguity in Frost's language can create multiple layers of meanings and enriches the reader's perception in his poems. Empson's theory discusses that ambiguity isn't an imperfection rather a meditative and prodigious tool used by authors to produce rich and complex literary works. This research outlines literary exploration through close reading that reflects on how Frost's deliberate use of ambiguity encourages the readers to deeply engage with his poetry, manifesting personal insights and diverse comprehension. The findings help to explain ambiguity in literature and its impact on poetic meaning by highlighting Frost's aptitude in creating poems with deeper complexity and multi-layered meanings.

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1. Introduction

Poetry is considered as one of the oldest literary genres in the history of literature. Poetry comprises artistically crafted verses that are thoughtfully arranged in terms of form (sound, rhyme, rhythm) and content (meaning), as emphasized by literary works (Ferdinal, 2013; Laimena & Que, 2022; Memon, Tunio, & Awan, 2021). Poetry, according to Pradopo (1999) and Sharma (2022), is an indirect statement, meaning that a poem expresses one thing while implying another. A poet is someone who writes poetry; and among the most famous poets of the 20th century is Robert Frost. His poetry frequently uses imagery from nature. Since its publication, many scholars have examined the topics, compositional styles and motifs in his poetry. But understanding Frost's view of nature is equally essential for the readers to have, since it will strengthen their understanding of his poetry and enable them to recognize the philosophy of life that exists in the natural world. Thus, the woods imagery found in "The Road Not Taken" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" will serve as the research object for this paper, which will also examine the dualistic qualities of the imagery, defend Frost's theory that nature is wise and dialectical, and probe into the subjective and objective justifications for nature through ambiguity, which is based on the idea that the nature is smart and dialectical. It seeks to improve people's comprehension of Frost's poetic imagery and his perspective on nature, so motivating them to take better care of the natural environment. It investigates multiple layers of meanings to express different and complex ideas through the medium of his poems.

The idea that poetry is a language of paradox is one that not many of us are willing to embrace (Brooks, 1968). According to Brooks, a poet's ability to use irony, paradox, and ambiguity is what distinguishes them as creative artificers as opposed to merely communicators or edifiers. What finally forces the reader to distinguish a poem from a straightforward statement or notion is the play of ambiguous tensions across the poem's language (Harrison, 2010). Since ambiguity can be interpreted as a way to generate multiple interpretations, implications, and connotations, as well as a way to celebrate imagination and express diversity, it is frequently linked to poetry. As such, poets employ it as a fundamental device, and its "machinations...are among the very roots of poetry." Because the line "it is a particularly subtle device for enriching the expressive power of language, a clear way of saying two things at once" is unclear, the poet can hide behind his suggested stance towards anything (Korg in Ibrahim). It is ambiguity that shapes the fine art of poetry into a sublime experience for each reader. Robert Frost indeed is one such poet who masterfully plays with ambiguity in his poems. It will not be untrue to say that Frost and ambiguity are synonyms. Reading Frost is indeed a journey into the wonderland. You jump into the rabbit hole and once inside you encounter a plethora of possibilities, each presenting a different journey towards a different destination, making it difficult to decide which way to go. As Bolton puts it, "Frost mastered an art that conceals art" (Frost & Hamilton, 1973). The best trait of Frost's poems is their ambiguity that leads on to a possibility of multiple interpretations. Be that the ambiguous representation of nature or the ambiguous equilibrium between the choices present and the chances taken, Frost guides the reader to an array of revelations. His poetry is full of subtextual ironies and rich in implications, rarely making direct statements. His poems do not present meanings, they rather invite the readers to construct meanings. This research article focuses on the underlying ambiguity in the selected works of Robert Frost.

2. Literature Review

A close reading of Frost's poems highlights how ambiguity plays magic with the minds of the readers with its creative wand. As Qiu (2010) states that Humans are ambiguous by nature; we frequently find ourselves going in two different directions at once. We delude ourselves if we believe we are pure because in our deepest hearts, we are never 100% of anything—neither kind nor hateful. According to Bhat (2017), the poem "*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*" explored the path of lives, boundaries, and restrictions that people typically experience. Upon investigation, Candilas (2022) discovered different results that mirrored Frost's disappointments and failures as depicted in the speaker's decision to take a moment of seclusion and solitude as he set out to rediscover himself by taking in and reflecting on the breathtaking beauty of nature. It also demonstrated Frost's admirable qualities as a dependable husband and father to his wife and children. William Empson (1906-1984) wrote *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, published in 1930, explores the complex and multidimensional nature of meaning in poetry in "Seven Types of Ambiguity," showing how ambiguity—often viewed as a flaw—is actually a potent and enriching component of literature. Empson breaks down seven types of ambiguity, all of which add to the nuanced emotional content and multilayered complexity of poetry. Empson encourages the readers to go further into literary interpretation by illuminating the complex relationship between words and meanings through his astute analysis and perceptive examples. Anyone interested in the boundless possibilities of language should read this ground-breaking book, which has been praised as a colossal addition to the literary criticism. It captivates with its academic rigour and zeal for revealing the hidden dimensions in poetry.

It was suggested, based on the previously described research investigations, that earlier analyses of his poetry, tended to concentrate either on the work's thematic significance or on its use of metaphorical language leading to ambiguity. The writers of this work have decided to examine the figurative languages in "*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*" and "*The Road not Taken*" in order to uncover its hidden meaning. The writers seek to make links between the hidden meaning of the poetry and the metaphorical language employed. There are seven different types of ambiguity in literature, according to William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930). The first kind happens when a detail works many functions simultaneously focusing on metaphor and double meanings. When two or more alternative interpretations are entirely resolved into one, the situation falls into the second category such as ambiguous comparisons and analogies. The third kind occurs when two seemingly unrelated meanings are conveyed at the same time, prompting ambiguity from multiple meanings. The fourth kind appears when conflicting interpretations come together to make sense of an author's complex mental state within a sentence structure and syntax. The fifth kind arises when a claim has a

meaning that is only clear after considering several possible interpretations, delving ambiguity into the realm of authorial ambiguity and unresolved irony. When a word or phrase seems to mean something different when taken out of context, it is classified as the sixth category such as deep symbols. The seventh form, and last, is when the writer learns the idea while writing, leading to contradictions and unresolved meanings, highlighting the complex and often elusive ways that literature can convey multiple layers of meaning. Empson's framework reveals the depth and complexity of literary language, showing how multiple layers of meaning can enrich a text.

3. Research Methodology

Research that uses library resources to gather data is known as library research. This type of research does not require outdoor research; instead, it confines its operations to library collection resources (Sari, 2020). Typically, library research involves gathering data by utilising a variety of library resources, including books, periodicals, documents, historical accounts, and more. Every stanza of the literary work was recorded by the researchers, and the writers subsequently explained each stanza's meaning based on the poem's symbols (Girsang, Situmorang, Situngkir, Elpride, & Simangunsong, 2023). Using a qualitative methodology, this study inspects Robert Frost's poetry from an interpretive perspective applying William Empson's Ambiguity theory. Frost's poems "The Road Not Taken" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," which were chosen for their deft use of cryptic language and symbolic imagery, serve as the primary source material. The analytical framework, "Seven Types of Ambiguity" by Empson, directs a close reading of the poetic texts to uncover several levels of meanings. The process entails reading the poems aloud several times to identify any unclear passages, classifying these passages using Empson's categories, and doing a comparative study to find the recurrent themes and symbols. The results are combined to create a thorough comprehension of the role that ambiguity plays in Frost's poetry, establishing links between particular instances and more general literary settings. The study undergoes peer review, preserves reflexivity regarding potential biases, and triangulate data with existing literary criticism. There aren't many ethical issues because the research will present interpretations and its analysis employes texts that are open to the public. The study attempts to shed light on Frost's use of ambiguity, demonstrating how it enhances his poetry with depth and complexity and encourages its readers to contemplate more deeply and interpret it in a variety of ways, even though concentrating on only two poems may limit generalizability.

4. Analysis

Frost's verse is surprisingly straightforward. He disguising contemporary poetry in the plain language, commonplace pictures, and bucolic surroundings of daily America (Emdad, n.d.). At a glance, his poems are works of colloquial, with a straightforward address to the reader but eventually shaping into a complex structure with layers and layers of meanings. As (Emdad, n.d.) writes:

Frost's poetic language is essentially very provocative and misleading as a result. By skilfully combining words and sentences, he crafts lyrics that provide several readings and multiple levels of meaning. The most striking example of ambiguity is Frost's "*The Road Not Taken*". The narrator experiences a dilemma while reaching a point during travel where the road ahead is forked. He is indecisive in choosing which road to take in order to reach his destination. Speculation leads him towards choosing a road that appears to be less travelled by. The use of diction 'less travelled by' reflects the height of ambiguity theorizing Empson's first type of ambiguity that focuses on double meaning using metaphor of the road. The poem represents the common human life dilemma of having to choose between two equally tempting alternatives. At a glance the poem appears decisively simple but a careful reading is like unwrapping a gift; the contents of which were misjudged by the rattle of the box. Frost does not seem to be caring about the road that he actually took but appears to be regretting the one he left. He regrets his choice almost instantly that makes the reader wonder what exactly motivated him to choose the apparently less travelled road if he is not satisfied with the choice. See Appendix-A for textual reference (Frost & Hamilton, 1973) (P. 263, L 16-20).

The choice is not only incomprehensible to the reader but also to the narrator as well. He spends long time looking at both the roads, calculating odds and ends and finally reaching a

decision. The second last line of the poem does not compliment the setting of the scene as the roads look the same:

The ambiguity here is sharp. If both the roads are the same then why does the narrator state later that he chose the *'one less travelled by'* and then, why does he regret his choice and will *'be telling this with a sigh'* if there is no apparent difference between which way to go. The complexity of meaning that starts from the very first line creeps into the whole poem and rests heavily at the last line, *"And that has made all the difference"* (Frost & Hamilton, 1973) (P. 263, L. 20).

There are endless possibilities of what difference has it made to the narrator. Does he regret his choice only because he could not come later to travel on the left-out road also? Or does he mean that the one he took that day was not as enticing as he thought it to be? Or is there a possibility that the road taken led him to some danger that he will always remember with a sigh? Or does it mean that the travelled road lost its appeal as soon as he took it just like the Biblical Apple? The first two stanzas of the poem appear to be taking a dig at human psyche. The narrator faces a dilemma, carefully considers his options and makes a final decision. The decision is not abrupt as it is made after reflecting long at both the roads and weighing the opportunities. The situation is a common enough experience of human life when men face situations in which they have to make a selection from attractive alternative opportunities. The selection, however, is often regretted as the things forsaken grow more in appeal just by way of not having them. This ordinary experience turns extraordinary in the last stanza where the choice actually makes a difference. Not just a difference but *'all the'* difference (Frost & Hamilton, 1973) (P. 263, L. 20). The travel poem turns into a gothic tale by the end, mounting the curiosity of the reader as to what awaits the narrator at the end of the road. There is no single answer to appease that curiosity.

Likewise, similar level of ambiguity is embedded in another of Frost's poems about journey, *"Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening"*. The poem is a multifaceted literary work, according to Candilas (2022), allowing each reader to create their own interpretation depending on their reading preferences, comprehension, culture, and prior information. Here again we have travel, woods and temptation at the core of the poem. See Appendix-B for textual reference (Frost & Hamilton, 1973) (P. 188, L. 1-16).

Once again, the reader is faced with a poem that is deceptively simple yet deep and implied in its nature. At surface level; the poem is a simple recounting of a man passing by the woods and stopping to watch snowfall. He thinks that he knows the owner of the woods who will not consider his presence here as trespassing. His admiration of the scene is interrupted by his horse that shakes his harness bells to question the rationality of stopping by these mysterious woods. This subtle interruption reminds the rider that he does not have enough time to admire the scenic beauty because he has a miles long travel ahead and has promises to keep as well. The depth and suggestiveness render a different meaning to it. The rider *thinks* that he is familiar with the owner of the woods but the very word *'think'* hints towards his uncertainty. The first line sets the atmosphere of the entire poem. The rider seems to think that his stopping here is fine since the owner cannot see him *"watching his woods fill up with snow"* (Frost & Hamilton, 1973) (P. 188, L.4). One wonders what will happen if the owner does appear. Will he welcome the rider for they seem acquainted? Or is the rider an uninvited guest for him? With two human characters in the poem i.e., the rider and the absent owner of the place, we have a third character that is the horse. Ironically, it is the animal who reminds the rider of his human obligations as the rider himself is immersed in the dark beauty of the woods. The writers came to the conclusion that the poem examined the journey of life and emphasized the significance of not getting too caught up in the beauty of one's surroundings to the point where one forgets the larger life journey that needs to be timely completed and cherished based on the findings of the analysis of figurative language and hidden meanings; the final two lines of the fourth stanza take on a deeper implicit meaning and an allegorical expression when the line *"And miles to go before I sleep"* is understood as a depiction of the arduous trip one must make before ending this life journey (Frost & Hamilton, 1973) (P. 188, L.16). These two lines also supported the researchers' theocratical framework that communicates how implicitly the poet has embedded hidden layers of meanings in this poem. Also, the poet wished to convey to the audience subtly: the need to accomplish important tasks before meeting one's demise.

The allure of uncharted territory is similar to "*The Road Not Taken*". There the dream-like image was broken by the intrusion of realist implications of the choice, here, it is broken by the obligations that are yet to be fulfilled. In both cases; the reader has been left with unanswered questions lapping at him from multiple sides. What place the rider has to reach? What promises? How many miles to reach at where? Is it an ordinary situation where he is reminded of his worldly duties or is it hitting at something more philosophic? Is the journey an ordinary one or is it symbolic? A journey towards a new beginning or a journey towards the end? What sleep is he referring to? A few hours' sleep or an eternal sleep? More than one critic has analyzed the poem in terms of the riders' journey towards death.

Ahmed and Al-Gobaei (2013) suggests that, "*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*" is a poem of deep philosophical connotation, where the poet reminds himself of his obligations to himself and to his fellow beings. "And a miles to go before I sleep" (Frost & Hamilton, 1973) (P. 188, L.16). is a symbol for life's journey which concludes in an eternal sleep known as death". However, reaching certain conclusions will end the profound beauty of Frost's art. Clarity of thought and meaning is not what the poetry of Frost projects most often.

Another fine example of ambiguity by Empson that leads to the complexity in his poetry is "The Sound of Trees". The poem begins by the speaker wondering about the trees and with that very notion puts the reader into wondering what sort of communication he shares with the trees. While some critics consider the speaker showing aversion towards the disturbance by the sound that the trees make, others are of the view that he is actually transfixed by their music. The contrasting scenario presented by 'Why', 'Wish' and 'bear' in the same line bewilders the reader. See Appendix-C for textual reference (Frost & Hamilton, 1973) (P.269, L.1-9).

The first nine lines appear as a simple description of human relation with nature but these are, like all other poems of Frost, heavy with multiple meanings. The speaker's attraction towards trees is similar to his attraction towards the woods in "*Stopping by the Woods in a Snowy Evening*". The sound of the trees is just as 'lovely, dark and deep' yet the narrator is unable to understand human fixation with it. Why do we wish to bear the sound when we cannot tolerate another form of noise close to our home? What other noises is he referring to? Is the sound unbearable only because it is close to home? There are lots of questions intricately woven into the pattern and as is always the case with Frost there is no question mark to indicate if he is actually asking something or merely challenging the reader to think out of the box.

The remaining poem talks of the inability of the trees to move and leave the place because of the roots and ends on the speakers' wish to make a reckless choice and be gone. Unlike trees, human beings can move from one place to another if they desire so. The trees can talk all they want but they cannot compete with the man in making choices and changing the course. Men move on, sometimes on the call of duty and sometimes for the inborn desire for change and adventure. What will motivate the speaker of this poem is really ambiguous. See Appendix-C for textual reference (Frost & Hamilton, 1973) (P.269, L.10-16).

The lines mention to a wild selection that shall be made "sometime" and "somewhere," We absolutely have no idea where and when and neither does the narrator. It will "scare the white clouds over them on" (L.7). The only option that can transcend space and time and be suggested by the veil of white clouds is death.Or maybe not as the speaker suggests that he 'shall have less to say' and not that he 'shall have nothing to say' (L.15). The poem employs with the idea of choice presented in "*The Road Not Taken*" and ends on an allusion of death as "*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*". The themes and dual meanings projected in those two poems are combined here within a single poem. However, like the previously discussed poems "*The Sound of the Trees*" also has the power to confuse the reader where each and every word is pregnant with meanings yet the actual meaning of the poet seems just out of reach. The ambiguity carefully strewn into the structure of his poems is disguised by the use of colloquial language and casual observations and comments.

He seeks to push his readers into a sea of suggestiveness where they themselves have to gulp and struggle. He elaborated the idea in one of his letters as:

My poems, and I presume the poems of everyone, are all prepared to take the reader on a journey into the infinite. I have always left my blocks, chairs and other ordinary objects where it would be quite likely for someone to trip and fall over them in the dark. This behaviour dates back to my early childhood. You understand, forward, but also in the dark. I might unintentionally leave my toys somewhere inappropriate. We are talking about my intention, my natural mischievousness. (Selected Letters of Robert Frost, p. 344).

5. Conclusion

This mischievousness renders the integral ambiguity to Frost's poems and makes reading them all the more fun. Readers find the poem as a tangible, emotional thing by following the play of pictures and the ambiguous meanings attached to the concept. Each reader shares the poem's intricate stories and imagery. This is Brooks' preferred term. This sharing, which is essentially an engagement with a range of meanings, associations, and feelings, is ultimately what drives the interaction between the poet and the creative reader (Harrison, 2010). Frost is the master of creating such relationships. His poetry evokes a sense of mystery in the readers that is seductive and ambiguous. He also gives his readers the power to let "the fancy roam" and decipher the conclusion that fits the poetic scenario imprinted in his own perceptive mind. It is the ambiguity that makes Robert Frost all the more attractive and all the more challenging. The poems by Frost center on societal issues and the intimate bond between people and the natural world. The scholars' examination of the literary device; ambiguity revealed that "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "The Road Not Taken" addressed topics of nature, social issues, and human existence folded in multiple layers of meanings; direct or indirect. The field of English education as well as the field of English literature might benefit greatly from this research. In terms of English literature, this research aims to provide the readers with the means to investigate the complex undertones and hidden meanings entwined in the poetry that emphasizes on finishing necessary chores prior to meeting one's demise.

Examining Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" for ambiguity using Empson's framework is crucial for English teachers profound understanding. Thus, the study supports the idea that by analyzing poetry that is richly ambiguous, the readers can greatly improve their comprehension and appreciation of figurative language. It offers priceless reflections for English teachers, giving them the tools, they need to educate pupils how to decipher the many levels of meanings buried in the metaphorical language used by the poets like Frost. Teachers can help students understand the subtle complexity of Frost's work and develop their critical thinking and interpretive abilities by implementing Empson's notion of ambiguity. In order to discover hidden meanings and recognize the creative craftsmanship involved in poetry in particular, this study provides students with profound insights into how to connect with English literature. Students gain the ability to identify and investigate the several kinds of ambiguity that contribute to Frost's poetry's multifaceted resonance through careful reading and interpretative analysis. This improves not only their reading comprehension but also their general language skills and critical thinking. Subsequent research endeavors ought to delve more profoundly into the fundamental rationales behind Frost's poetic selections, delving into the historical, cultural, and individual circumstances that shaped his compositions. A closer look at the diction and poetic style of his poems can also provide light on the ways in which his purposeful use of language provokes ambiguity and differing interpretations. The broader application of Empson's theory in literary studies as well as a more thorough comprehension of Frost's literary craft would both benefit from such research.

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Appendices

Appendix- A

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
 And sorry I could not travel both
 And be one traveler, long I stood
 And looked down one as far as I could
 To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
 And having perhaps the better claim,
 Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
 Though as for that the passing there
 Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
 In leaves no step had trodden black.
 Oh, I kept the first for another day!
 Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
 I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
 Somewhere ages and ages hence:
 Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
 I took the one less traveled by,
 And that has made all the difference. (Frost, 1849, P. 263)

Appendix- B

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.
 His house is in the village though;
 He will not see me stopping here
 To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
 To stop without a farmhouse near

Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.(Frost, 1849, P. 188)

Appendix- C **The Sound of Trees**

I wonder about the trees.
Why do we wish to bear
Forever the noise of these
More than another noise
So close to our dwelling place?
We suffer them by the day
Till we lose all measure of pace,
And fixity in our joys,
And acquire a listening air.
They are that that talks of going
But never gets away;
And that talks no less for knowing,
As it grows wiser and older,
That now it means to stay.
My feet tug at the floor
And my head sways to my shoulder
Sometimes when I watch trees sway,
From the window or the door.
I shall set forth for somewhere,
I shall make the reckless choice
Some day when they are in voice
And tossing so as to scare
The white clouds over them on.
I shall have less to say,
But I shall be gone.(Frost, 1849, P.269).