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Seven Types Of Ambiguity



Synopsis

First published in 1930, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* has long been recognized as a landmark in the history of English literary criticism. Revised twice since it first appeared, it has remained one of the most widely read and quoted works of literary analysis. Ambiguity, according to Empson, includes "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language." From this definition, broad enough by his own admission sometimes to see "stretched absurdly far," he launches into a brilliant discussion, under seven classifications of differing complexity and depth, of such works, among others, as Shakespeare's plays and the poetry of Chaucer, Donne, Marvell, Pope, Wordsworth, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and T. S. Eliot.

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Customer Reviews

The art of close reading as a technique to glean meaning from a text involves the use of a myriad of critical reading skills that we like to think are taught in both secondary and higher education. I might have begun the next sentence with, "Alas..." but instead it might be useful to point out that the deficiencies of readers in comprehending texts is not limited to today. In the years following the end of the Great War, students then as now were increasingly slothful in their reading skills. Part of the problem was that the term "ambiguity" had received some bad press. Most readers assume that when they read a text that if they encounter a word, phrase, term, or idea that they deem ambiguous it must be the result of sloppy writing on the author's part. William Empson in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* rises to the defense of ambiguity by insisting that the rush to indict it as slothful thinking

might just be premature. What, Empson asks, should a reader think if an ambiguous word or idea is deliberately so? Does the mere fact that this word or idea might have more than one meaning suggest that the author does not supply any helpful hints? Empson writes of ambiguity as if it were yet another close reading technique that when judiciously used induces the reader to peek under the patina of that ambiguity to uncover a richness of meaning that might otherwise lie dormant. Other New Critical writers prior to Empson have urged readers to be aware of the presence of ambiguities but mostly in the context of adversely judging the presence of an "organic unity" that might be forestalled by their presence. Ambiguities thus have a definite upside.

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