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# Ambiguity in Ballad Discourse. Coventry Patmore: "The Woodman's Daughter"

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**Abstract.** Ambiguity as a literary term refers to the effect of uncertainty of choice between differing meanings which are equally tenable in a given linguistic context. Ambiguity is design in poetry; it appeals to the human capacity of enduring uncertainty, and as this paper argues, its function may be further specified by examining the non-linguistic contexts. The semantic ambiguities in Coventry Patmore's ballad generate an air of mystery, which beyond being a genre characteristic, shapes the reader's interpretation of the fallen woman theme. The paper compares the ballad with its textual antecedent as well as with contemporary treatments of its subject, and concludes by considering the reader's responses to the polyvalent image of the central character that thus represents typical outcomes of the fallen woman conflict.

**Keywords:** semantic and pragmatic ambiguity, referential uncertainty, narration, reporting, context

## 1. Introduction

Ambiguity, the effect of uncertainty of choice between different meanings, engages the human capacity for accepting the lack of certainty. This is how this human capacity is described in Keats' theory of "negative capability," in a letter to his brother:



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> . . . at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. (277)

What seem relevant for a study of ambiguity in Keats' definition are the elements of uncertainty, doubts and also the absence of irritable searching for definite knowledge. Ambiguity in poetry and art entices by offering a rare experience, as it couples surprise with a wish to know more, and thus draws together pleasure and thinking. Why is the human fascination with ambiguity?

The objective of this paper is to outline how ambiguity is generated, and to demonstrate, by examining a ballad by Coventry Patmore, how meaning related to ambiguity is refined by contexts.

## 2. Definition of ambiguity

The dictionary definitions of "ambiguity" in English come to something similar to 'uncertainty, multiple meaning'. However, ambiguity as a term used in linguistics, stylistics, literary and art criticism is more specific than its dictionary meaning. The concept of ambiguity as a valuable feature was introduced, and used in an extended sense, by William Empson, who provided the following definition: "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language" (3). His approach was response-based as it becomes clear from his classification of ambiguity into the decipherable and the non-decipherable types:

> Ambiguities of this sort may be divided into those which, once understood, remain an intelligible unit in the mind; those in which the pleasure belongs to the act of working out and understanding, which must at each reading, though with less labour, be repeated; and those in which the ambiguity works best if it is never discovered. (57)

New Criticism considered ambiguity to be intrinsic to literary texts, and ambiguities were uncovered by the method of close textual analysis. René Wellek and Austin Warren regarded literary language as abounding in ambiguities, by which they meant "highly connotative" (23). Ambiguity has been viewed for a long time as a feature inherent in literary texts, especially in poetry. More recently Henry Widdowson said that poetic meanings are "of their very nature unspecific and ambiguous" and therefore "elusive of precise description" (116). However, he seemed to use the term ambiguity in a sense similar to Empson's, in relation to the

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variety of meanings or rather, interpretations that a poem allows. Before the publication of Soon Peng Su: *Lexical Ambiguity in Poetry*, the term ambiguity was not used with consistency, but often as a synonym of such cognate phenomena as obscurity and vagueness, multiple meaning, and especially indeterminacy. Indeterminacy involves a kind of openness, inviting the reader who is faced with the question "What is the meaning?" to project an interpretation, because some aspects of the poetic significance are indefinite. In contrast, ambiguity has nothing to do with indistinctness, rather it involves a choice between definite and finite number of possibilities within a given context, so the reader's question is which to choose (Su 113).

What exactly is ambiguity according to Su? Ambiguity is a form of multiple meaning, thus its potential is fundamentally a semantic issue, but "actual ambiguity results only when a certain relation is set up between the senses, when the word is placed in context, and interpreted as having disparate and alternative senses which are both tenable or relevant in the context" (43). Ambiguity is regarded as a primarily pragmatic phenomenon as it is realized in context, and through contextual interpretation. Whereas semantics studies meaning at an abstract level, pragmatics is interested in the concrete level of language use, and considers the speaker's intention, context, and the hearer's interpretation.

## 3. Interrelation between ambiguity, meaning and context

With ambiguity the central question is which meaning applies, and how do the different meanings apply at the same time? No language use can occur outside of a context; therefore meaning in pragmatics is contextually determined. Since meaning depends on context, a phrase can have more than one sense tenable in a text only if they suit the context. The concept of context includes: 1. the linguistic context, i.e. the most immediate context, which means the surrounding linguistic environment of phrase, sentence, and text level as well as the subject matter of the text; 2. the non-linguistic context , i.e. the cultural and cognitive dimensions of the context (the immediate context of the act of communication, which includes situational factors such as author-reader relationship, genre, and the least immediate context, which encompasses authorship, culture, tradition as well as historical facts) (Su 62). Examining a literary text, a ballad written in dialogue form by William Auden, Ronald Carter distinguishes three types of context: 1. the inner and outer context of the relation between speakers internal to the text, as well as between author and reader external to the text; 2. the intertextual context of literary tradition to which the poem alludes; 3. the historical context in which the work was written (69). It is generally recognized in discourse stylistics that literature is a discourse which exists in interaction with the larger cultural and discursive activity in which it is produced.

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Not only the production but also the reception of literature can be affected by the discursive networks of genre, intertextuality, culture, and history. Meaning cannot be dissociated from the hearer/reader who is part of the social context, and be regarded as wholly intrinsic to the language of the text. Context involves a cognitive aspect as well, the shared knowledge of readers, necessary to the understanding of a poem, which Geoffrey Leech calls "background knowledge" (13).

The following parts of this essay will examine "The Woodman's Daughter," a poem by Coventry Patmore, with the aim to demonstrate how consideration of the different types of context refines and enriches meaning related to ambiguity.

## 4. Linguistic context

The starting point for the reader in the interpretation of a literary work has to be the language of the text. Detailed attention is given to the story, the speaker, his vocabulary, syntax, figurative language, meter, tone, etc. Linguistic context is important, because it functions as a means of deciphering ambiguity if it contains sufficient cues that guide the selection of one meaning over others. This is what usually happens to semantic ambiguity in actual language use, where the missing cues can be supplied. Insufficient contextual specification however, permits differing meaning to apply at the same time. Moreover, the immediate linguistic context may be designed so as to deliberately generate ambiguity (Su 72). This consideration provides a ground for investigating the immediate linguistic context first.

Patmore's poem,[1] as published since 1888, tells a narrative, the story of Maud, a woodcutter's daughter (Page 24-28). When she was a child, she lived happily at her father's cottage by the hill, spending her days working at her spinning wheel, or following her father, Gerald, where he worked. The rich squire's son, a young boy, would come and stand gazing at them, sometimes offering Maud some fruits which she accepted. As time went by, they spent more time together, and away from her father's presence. They enjoyed each other's talk innocently, and this continued spring after spring until one day Maud told her father that she was with child. In the present tense of the ballad situation however the father "is gone" and Maud steels out to the stream one evening where the concluding tragic event occurs. It is not clear, however, which of the following actions takes place: Maud is either still pregnant, and drowns herself, or she drowns her baby, and herself goes mad, or she drowns the baby and herself at the same time. What is the source of this ambiguity? It is obvious that the story is presented in a manner to deliberately avoid clarity. The linguistic means of creating ambiguity in the poem are referential uncertainty and figurative language.

[1] See the text of the ballad at <http://www.archive.org/stream/poems00chamgoog#page/n182/mode/2up>

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**Referential uncertainty**. In the description of the troubled situation of Maud, when she admits her pregnancy, there are two phrases of definite reference which turn out to be the sources of referential uncertainty, thus producing ambiguity. One is in stanza 11, where informed about Maud's pregnancy, Gerald says 'Poor Child!' and puts his hand on her head, a gesture indicating the referent of his phrase. In the last line of the stanza, however, the narrator says that Gerald would think of Maud "as if the child were dead". It is not clear whether "child" in the first line and "the child" in the last are co-references, and both refer to Maud, or have different referents. Capitalization in "Poor Child!" makes it clear that it is meant as a vocative phrase, but "the child" in the last line may just as well refer to Maud as to her child. As a kind of foreshadowing of some eventual tragedy, it remains unclear if it is Maud or her child that is doomed to die. It is very likely that this uncertainty is part of the poet's design, since the ambiguity of the phrase could easily have been avoided, and without impairing the rhythmic pattern of the line, by simply supplying "her" or "his" for the definite article.

Another case of referential uncertainty is a deictic phrase in stanza 17: "But Maud will never go/While those great bubbles struggle up/From the rotting weeds below." Whose bubbles? Maud's or the baby's? Did Maud drown the baby or herself? This ambiguity is especially confusing since definite reference normally implies, as Alan Cruse outlines, not only that the referential target is a particular entity that can be uniquely identified by the speaker, and that it is intended to be uniquely identified for the hearer, but it also implies the assurance that the hearer has enough information to uniquely identify the referent, taking into account the semantic content of the referring expression, and the information available from the context (situational, linguistic or mental) (307). Indefinite reference can also be the source of ambiguity, like in stanza 13, where the indefinite noun phrase "some thought" is ambiguous, and it is up to the reader to decide whether it refers to the idea of infanticide or suicide:

> The shadow of her shame and her
> Deep in the stream, behold!
> Smiles quake over her parted lips;
> Some thought has made her bold;
> She stoops to dip her fingers in,
> To feel if it be cold.

**Figurative language.** Among the lexical sources of ambiguity not only polysemy, homonymy and referential uncertainty are to be considered but also tropes. What makes tropes potential sources of ambiguity is their very nature, i.e. they are implied statements, and are based on the play of distinct layers of meaning, the play between the literal and the figurative senses. Empson regarded

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tropes ambiguous simply because they rely on the connotation of words and evoke multiple associations (2). In a narrower sense, as we have seen, a phrase is called ambiguous if it has at least two distinctly different cognitive senses, i.e. denotations, which are tenable in the given context. In figurative language, however, a trope generates ambiguity if both the denotative meaning and the figurative senses are tenable, or the phrase has two or more distinctly different figurative senses, and both are tenable in the context (Su 139-140).

In the figurative language of Patmore's ballad, ambiguity is generated by synecdoche, metonymy and metaphor. The meaning of the noun phrase "her shame" in stanza 13, although a definite referring expression, is ambiguous, as the context allows both the interpretation of 'pregnancy' and 'baby'. This synecdoche is based on substitution of opinion for fact, thus the ambiguity is between two figurative senses: Maud's out-of-marriage pregnancy, or her illegitimate child. However strange it is for a baby to be referred to as "shame," this possibility is supported by Maud's action of testing the temperature of the water ("she stoops to dip her fingers in to feel if it be cold"), and her recollecting in the next stanza that the stream "bears everything away".

The next ambiguous trope is a phrase with distinct literal and figurative senses which are yet tenable in the context. The narrator reports that standing over the stream Maud's "arms fall down". The literal interpretation is that she drops her baby into the stream, whereas the metonymical interpretation suggests that her arms fall down because she herself falls into the stream. This would establish the phrase in stanza 13 "The shadow of her shame and her/Deep in the stream" as prefiguring either or both infanticide and suicide.

After the tragic decision Maud remains in the same place, "at her post". "Post" is a place where a soldier is on watch, which suggests metaphorically that Maud is watching her drowned baby in the stream, or if we follow another association, i.e. a post as a place that soldiers are not to leave, Maud's post might as well indicate her death. The next metaphorical phrase "sunk in a dread unnatural sleep" seems to reinforce this double sense: "sunk" and "dread" suggest death, and death is often referred to as sleep; but the same phrase also allows the interpretation 'mad consciousness,' especially because the narrator reports earlier that Maud "sings wildly now". The ambiguity in the last stanza is generated by two distinct figurative senses of the metaphor "unnatural sleep".

It seems that ambiguities occur in the language of the ballad with a consistency that they make the action non-definable, and argue for a closer look at the non-linguistic context.

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## 5. Genre as context

Genres are part of the literary tradition that the work of poetry relies on for communicating its meaning. The conventions of a particular genre act like a context in which meaning makes itself recognizable and more naturally accessible to the reader. Tzvetan Todorov suggests that genres are products of discourse, i.e. of the various discursive choices, and says that the literary genres are nothing but "choices among discursive possibilities, choices that a given society has made conventional" (10).

Meaning in a literary work is produced by the linguistic, literary and cultural systems, so what is said, and how it is said, are determined by the type of the discourse chosen. The reader, who has to interpret it, needs literary competence, i.e. implicit understanding of the operations of this literary discourse. Furniss and Bath point out that the codes and conventions of each genre are part of the reader's literary competence, and as such they provide cues for the reader's interpretation of meaning (346). How recognizing the genre characteristics contributes to interpreting meaning is demonstrated by examining "The Woodman's Daughter" as a ballad.

Patmore's 1888 poem is a literary ballad, i.e. a short narrative poem rooted in the tradition of orally transmitted folk ballads. Thus the typical structural and stylistic traits of the genre to be taken into account by the reader are as follows. Ballads focus on a single situation, a sensational event, which is also the conclusive episode of the story. Most of the action is presented in dialogue form, and in the presentation of the narrative there are abrupt transitions in time, unannounced by the impersonal narrator. The most specific characteristic trait of ballads is a particular kind of vagueness, an air of mystery generated by its dramatic form, and also by a conspicuous absence of circumstantial detail and psychological motivation. The language of the ballad is formulaic, stylized, employing repetition and parallelism, which are not merely ornamental but also emphatic. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* underlines that in a ballad "every artistic resource is pointed toward giving an intensity and immediacy to the action and toward heightening the emotional impact of the climax" (Peminger, Brogan, and Warnke 116). It should also be noted that the English literary ballads of nineteenth century romanticism are not full imitations of the orally transmitted traditional ballad. They are primarily poems in their own right, although written in imitation of a few aspects of the traditional ballad. The most obvious difference is the narrator: whereas the fundamental characteristic of popular ballads is an absence of subjectivity and of self-consciousness, the narrator in a literary ballad betrays his presence in the narration through emotional intensity of expression, and may even play an important part in the development of the plot. It seems the major requirements of a literary ballad are structural rather than formal, i.e. it is enough

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for a narrative with a tragic story to pass as a ballad if it has a climactic situation reported in present tense, with flashback by the speaker who recollects some antecedents of this present situation.

"The Woodman's Daughter" does not adopt the formal and stylistic characteristics of the traditional ballad. Its story is not told in a formulaic language, the poem dispenses with dialogue form, balancing stanzas, framing, repetition and also the typical ballad meter. Patmore's ballad does not follow the tradition of dramatic presentation of the story either. It is an utterance made by a single, implicit speaker; therefore in a stylistic examination of the poem the first question is "Whose voice do we hear?" All lyric poems allow the interpretation to postulate a speaker distinct from the author, and to regard the poem as an utterance by this speaker, who either identifies himself or is made to remain invisible. However impersonal his manner may be, it is possible to describe this speaker, at least in terms of his relationship with his addressee, by the mode of his speech and the functions he performs. Patmore's speaker remains impersonal, and never identifies himself, neither does he establish a relationship with his audience, apart from only two rather ambiguous phrases: in stanza 13 an imperative ("behold!"), either addressed to the listener or an expression of the character's surprise, and in stanza 18 "you" as a form of address or a word used in a generic sense.

What is more important about the speaker's characteristics in "The Woodman's Daughter" is that he is assigned a double role of relating past events and reporting present happenings. Anthony Easthope defines the ballad as a genre with rapid and unannounced transitions between "discours" and "histoire," i.e., between subjective and objective modes of speech. In the former, emphasis is on enunciation, i.e. on the speaker–listener relationship, on 'narration', which is the subjective aspect of the narrative. "Histoire," however, concentrates on the enounced, i.e., the story, the plot of the narrative (147). In Patmore's single-speaker ballad the narrator seems to be divided between these two functions, as out of the 19 stanzas 10 form a narrative preliminary dealing with the past events that led to the present situation. The speaker relates these past happenings keeping to their chronology, with the linear temporal structure of the poem broken only twice: embedded in past tense narration, the concluding phrase of the last line of stanza 1 ("In the garden now grown wild"), and the entire stanza 5, which refers to the present situation, in the narrative preliminary. The speaker's recollection of the past is carried out in a manner of clarity, as it is factual, objective, limited to the description of a sequence of situations and happenings told in a clear linear arrangement. Following stanza 11, however, there occurs a shift in the narrator's manner, similar to Easthope's distinction. The second major role of the speaker, i.e., reporting the present happenings of the climactic situation in stanzas 12-19 is performed very differently from his objective narrative. Although reporting sets the

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expectation by the reader of clarity, the speaker's manner of reporting is dominated by ambiguity and intense sensuous imagery aiming at a specific aesthetic effect.

The story of the ballad is marked by certain vagueness from the start, which stems from gaps in the narrative line (the circumstances of what happened to Gerald, the father, and why Maud is not married are shrouded in mystery). Then this air of mystery is further reinforced by a lack of sufficient cues in the context of the speaker's present tense reporting. This happens first in stanza 5, where the preliminary hints at the present situation leave the exact cause of Maud's wild singing veiled, so it can be interpreted either as an act of extreme grief, or a sign of her madness or both. The temporal aspect is unclear as well: how much time has elapsed since the father's death is not to be known. Ambiguities, however, develop only in the main part of the ballad. It is in stanzas 11-19, which report the climactic situation in present tense, that the semantic ambiguities of the poem, discussed before, occur ("the shadow of her shame," "her arms fall down," "some thought has made her bold," "while those great bubbles struggle up," "Maud is constant at her post," "sunk in a dread, unnatural sleep"). Another source of ambiguity here is pragmatic, as at certain points it is impossible to decide whether the speaker reports from his own point of view and addresses the listener/reader, or projects himself into the central character Maud, and the happenings are filtered through her consciousness and reported from her point of view. This is the case in stanza 13, where there is uncertainty as to whose point of view is reflected in the phrase "behold," i.e., whether it is the speaker or Maud, or perhaps both, whose surprise is expressed at catching sight of the girl's shadow in the water:

> The shadow of her shame and her
> Deep in the stream, behold!
> Smiles quake over her parted lip:
> Some thought has made her bold;
> She stoops to dip her fingers in,
> To feel if it be cold.

**Shift in point of view**. In the narrator's speech there is a sudden shift of focus from the character's consciousness to that of the narrator, which is marked by the second half of stanza 15. After the decisive act of Maud ("Her arms fall down") the speaker switches from the sequence of present happenings in his reporting to focus on details that are perceived as circumstances of the main acts, i.e. sensuous images not essential to the story: the sudden change of light to horrible, the contrasts formed to this by the merrily noisy chime from the church tower, the carolling larks soaring up to the sky, the reflection in the pool of the hot light of the setting sun ("scarlet West") and the East changing ashy pale. Instead of completing his task of reporting in a sequential line, the final section of the ballad is dedicated to

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description, and out of its twenty-six lines only three and a half refer to the central character. Rather than provide a factual report of the actual happenings in this climactic situation, and make the ambiguous statements unequivocal, the closing section of the poem foregrounds the speaker, and allows him to convey his own sensual experiences, as a distraction from the main line of the action. The narrator plays the role of an observer, and dwells on the changes of the evening environment to create an eerily romantic mood:

Merrily now from the small church-tower
Clashes a noisy chime;
The larks climb up thro' the heavenly blue,
Carolling as they climb;
Is it the twisting water-eft
That dimples the green slime?

The pool reflects the scarlet West
With a hot and guilty glow;
The East is changing ashy pale;
But Maud will never go
While those great bubbles struggle up
From the rotting weeds below.

After this, the almost fearful and Gothic effect of the sensuous imagery as a lasting impression on the reader's mind in the coda (last two stanzas) draws entirely on the speaker's individual perceptions, his mental and emotional reaction, and thus the lyrical element becomes prevalent over the narrative.

## 6. Cultural and historical context

The context of a literary work can be defined as a broad term, including all those factors that determine meaning: relevant aspects of the authorship, the history of the subject matter, also the social and moral milieu of the culture surrounding it. With "The Woodman's Daughter," it is certain details of the author's biography, contemporary reception, moral conventions and the poem's textual history that seem to be relevant parts of its context.

**Biographical facts and contemporary reception**. Today Coventry Patmore (1823-1896) is chiefly remembered for his epic poem on domestic idyll, called "Angel in the House," a long verse sequence published in four parts between 1854 and 1862. The title of the sequence became a term used in reference to women

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embodying the Victorian feminine ideal, in the wake of Virginia Woolf, who satirized this ideal in a speech of 1931.

"The Woodman's Daughter" is an early poem of Patmore's, published in his first poetic volume in 1844. The volume was met with unfavorable criticism by the contemporary reviewer of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, which disappointed and upset the poet. A few years later Patmore became closely associated with the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (it was he who prompted Ruskin to write his famous letter to *The Times* in defence of the PRB against critical attacks in 1851). These young artists all knew and liked Patmore's poems, and as Holman Hunt recalls in his *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, Patmore's "The Woodman's Daughter" was a novel interest to all of them eager to find new poems, and it was one of the poems Dante Gabriel Rossetti liked to recite from memory (qtd. in Landow). In an oil painting, "The Woodman's Daughter" (1851) Pre-Raphaelite artist John Everett Millais depicted the characters' romance as children, and when the painting was first exhibited at the Royal Academy, it was accompanied by two stanzas from Patmore's poem, pertaining to the represented scene. Millais's painting is an indication of both the fact that the story of Maud was known to the public and that the painting must have contributed to its popularity. Patmore's closeness to the Pre-Raphaelite artists suggests the likelihood that he might not have remained intact by the Pre-Raphaelite treatment of the fallen woman theme.

**Contemporary moral conventions and textual history.** The fallen woman was a dominant subject in Victorian art, poetry and narrative art. The great social novelists of the period, such as Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot considered the moral fall of women in the context of other effects of industrial society and treated these characters with sympathetic observation. The typical treatment of the theme, however, was in the spirit of the hypocritical double morality of the age: infidelity on the part of the husband was tacitly allowed, while the same act by a woman was condemned. Most Victorian works portrayed the woman alone, as if she had been the sole cause of her own bitter fate. The common view in the Puritanical attitude was that once a girl or a woman had sinned, she was beyond rescue, and deserved no indulgence or pity. She was a social outcast, left to bear the consequences of her immorality, and suicide was her only escape, as paintings like "The Outcast" (1851) by Richard Redgrave and "Found Drowned" by George Frederic Watts (1867) tell us. Leopold Egg's tryptich "Past and Present" (1858) depicts the grim consequences of the wife's infidelity on her, and her family. The conventional treatment of the subject was not without didacticism, the purpose to instruct the viewer to avoid similar temptation.

The Pre-Raphaelites were also haunted by the theme of the fallen woman, but their attitude was different. Many Pre-Raphaelite paintings include the male, either directly, like in "The Awakening Conscience" (1851-1853) by Holman Hunt,

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"Retribution" (1854) by John Everett Millais and "Too Late" (1858) by William Lindsay Windus, or indirectly, like in "Take your son, Sir!" (1856) by Ford Madox Brown, which make it explicit that the sexual transgression of the woman is an act shared with a guilty man. The focus is not the woman's sin, rather her troubled situation, for which the blame is shifted on the man who wronged her. The woman is depicted with compassion as a victim, to raise the awareness of social injustice.

In his 1851 oil painting "The Woodman's Daughter" Millais depicted a scene from the story which allowed him to present the budding of the boy and the girl's romance. The two children occupy the central place in the composition, especially the squire's son. He is leaning with his back against a tree, as he is offering fruit to the girl, who is receiving it. The boy wears a striking red outfit, red being symbolic of passion, white stockings, and these colors make his entire figure stand out from his environment, suggesting the idea of incompatibility. The white color is repeated in the gathering clouds in the sky, which symbolically foreshadow disaster. The position of the boy's body leaning in the opposite direction, away from Maud, is also indicative of his future behavior. He keeps her at a distance, and although extends his arm towards her, there is certain rigidity in his pose. Instead of painting a portrait of the fallen woman in the spirit of contemporary moral conventions, the painter depicts her as an object of male desire, an innocent prey rather than a guilty woman. Millais establishes naivety and innocence as the girl's characteristic features, and places the blame on the boy. Ironically, as Jessica Webb remarks, the biblical image of temptation involving the female as tempter is reversed, and here the boy, the future seducer is the tempter offering the fruit. Millais's portrayal of Maud as an innocent girl erases "any hint of adult female lust," and "it is the girl's masculine counterpart that is labelled with the sin of excessive sexuality" (8).

In Patmore's verse narrative with the same title "The Woodman's Daughter,"[2] published in the poet's first volume in 1844, which Millais was acquainted with, the narrator relates the story of Maud, devoting more attention to the development of the love between the two young characters. Merton finally seduced her, but for some reason Maud does not disclose her situation to him, so he does not marry her. Maud's father, the girl's only support, died, probably heartbroken, and the grief felt over her abandonment drives Maud to drown her child; then realizing her crime, she is tortured into madness by remorse. The final version of the poem, which Patmore authorized for publication, and appeared in his *Collected Poems* (1888), shows significant differences, and the alterations concern primarily the character of Maud. It is obvious that the poet's intention was to render Maud innocent, guiltless of infanticide, which is evidenced by the first phrase (see the underlined phrases) he changed in the opening stanza:

[2] See the 1844 text at <http://ia360605.us.archive.org/2/items/poemspatmore00patmrich/ poemspatmore00patmrich.pdf>

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| (1844) | (1888) |
|---|---|
| In "Gerald's Cottage," on the hill, | In Gerald's Cottage by the hill, |
| Old Gerald, and his child-– | Old Gerald and his child |
| His daughter, Maud–dwelt happily;– | Innocent Maud dwelt happily; |

The explicit description of Maud's sinful act was later altered, and this ultimately makes her appear as a victim rather than a sinner. A major means to change the central character's image as a sinner committing infanticide was ambiguities in the narrator's reporting. In the ballad situation much of the explicitness in the speaker's report of present happenings was replaced by ambiguous phrases, like in stanzas 12 and 13:

| (1844) | (1888) |
|---|---|
| Poor Maud comes out to feel the air, | But he is gone: and Maud steals out, |
| This gentle day of June; | This gentle day of June; |
| And having sobbed her babe to sleep, | And having sobb'd her pain to sleep; |
| [……..……..] | [……..….] |
| The shadow of her little babe, | The shadow of her shame and her |
| Deep in the stream, behold! | Deep in the stream, behold! |

The 1844 text is a long narrative poem of 63 stanzas, called a "tale," "a story of seduction, madness and child murder" by its contemporary reviewer and not a ballad (Blackwood's 333). Maud feels miserable and regretful about her pregnancy, and soon her father dies at work unexpectedly. The cause of Maud's abandonment is not explained; it is as though it is understood that illegitimate pregnancy alone is cause enough to end a relationship. In fact this is one of the targets of the reviewer's criticism, who obviously finds it illogical that rather than causing inconvenience to her lover Maud ruins herself by killing the baby of their illicit love:

> But Merton? He, if that were done,
> Could scarcely fail to know
> The ruin he had caused;–he might
> Be brought to share her woe,
> Making it doubly sharp.

When in the end Maud drowns her baby, she is struck by the realization of her crime, and her consequent madness is made explicit in the last stanza. The central character in the 1844 poem is a guilty woman, who accepts full responsibility for her situation. This treatment of the subject seems consistent with Victorian double

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standards, as it is only the female who is to bear the burden of her fall, and the poet shows that the first fall is inevitably followed by further falls, i.e. the sinful act of infanticide, and its punishment, the descent into madness.

Later on Patmore turned his 1844 long narrative into a ballad, by building more tension in its structure. In order to make it more compact, he removed the speaker's meditations and several narrative stanzas. The most significant change is the removal of Maud's reaction to her fatal act, and its replacement by the speaker's observations of the surroundings:

(1844)
Merrily now from the small church-tower
Ringeth a noisy chime;
The larks climb up through the heavenly blue,
Carolling as they climb:
And lo! In her eyes stands the great surprise
That comes with the first crime!

(1888)
Merrily now from the small church-tower
Clashes a noisy chime;
The larks climb up thro' the heavenly blue,
Carolling as they climb;
Is it the twisting water-eft
That dimples the green slime?

A similar significant change concerns the imagery in the closing section of the poem: the 1844 text includes images reflecting the mad consciousness of the central character, the imagery merging subjective and objective reality, but two of these stanzas focusing on the character's consciousness are not included in the 1888 ballad, and thus the sensuous images in its concluding stanzas (16-19), starting with "The pool reflects the scarlet west" can be associated with the narrator's point of view alone:

(1844)
She throws a glance of terror round:
There's not a creature nigh.
But behold! The Sun, that looketh through
The frowning western sky,
Is lifting up one broad beam, like
A lash of God's own eye.

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She sees it; and, with steady fear
At what she dares not shun,
Still gazes: her astonished heart
Faints down, for she has done
An act which to her soul has made
A spy of the great Sun.

(1844 and 1888)
The pool reflects the scarlet west
With a hot and guilty glow,
The east is changing ashy pale,
And yet she dares not go,
For still those bubbles struggle up
From the rotting weeds below.

As can be seen in these stanzas above, the sensuous images in the description of the evening environment, which follow Maud's realization of her crime, are perceived in the 1844 poem as reflecting symbolically her sinking into madness, whereas the focus is shifted on the speaker in the 1888 ballad, and the imagery in the next stanzas, which at the same time form the coda, reflects the mood evoked by the situation in the speaker:

The light has changed. A little since
You scarcely might descry
The moon, now gleaming sharp and bright,
From the small cloud slumbering nigh;
And, one by one, the timid stars
Step out into the sky.
The night blackens the pool; but Maud
Is constant at her post,
Sunk in a dread, unnatural sleep.
Beneath the skiey host
Of drifting mists, thro' which the moon
Is riding like a ghost.

In conclusion, it can be stated that Patmore empathized with his character, and wanted to restore her, the woman originally tainted by infanticide, to innocence, by introducing ambiguity to erase explicitness in the description of her sinful act. The ambiguities in the narration of the action allow the formation of a polyvalent image of the central character, who in effect represents the most possible outcomes of the fallen woman conflict (infanticide, suicide and madness). Maud is made to appear

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as a victim of her ill fate, and the focus of attention is shifted from what she actually did to the reactions that her fatal situation may evoke in a witness (the narrator).

## 7. The reader as context

Context is not only an external and objective framework in which a literary work exists, with its meaning encoded in the text, but also a psychological construct. Meaning is not entirely contained within language, as Su claims, but is also attributed by a human consciousness. It is "not a passive activity of choosing from a given, fixed set of meanings, but rather, it involves an active interaction between the human mind and the text" (63). Text, context (the objective factors) and reader (the subjective factor) are interdependent for a meaningful reading. Meaning is not selected but constructed out of various relevant factors which interact within a given context. David Birch regards the reader as part of a social and historical context (260). Leech's "background knowledge" contributes to the interpretation of a given utterance, and this shared knowledge is a key concept in reader-oriented criticism, which is interested in not only what but also how texts mean. Reader-oriented criticism is based on the idea that meaning is constructed in the reading process as an interaction between text, context and reader. The role of the reader is not passive reception; rather, it is conceptualizing the indeterminacies in the text to produce a determinate meaning.

What is the relevance of the reader in a study of ambiguity? Su points out that since the reader's contribution to meaning is to realize it, potential ambiguity is also actualized by the reader. It is the reader who searches for clues in the linguistic context, supplements from his experience and reflects in uncertainty on the possible choices (93). However, this is general to the conceptualization of all meaning. What particular effect does ambiguity make on the reading process? Through stylistic means poetic structures often violate and deform cognitive principles in order to achieve effects unique to poetic discourse. As such a stylistic means, ambiguity flouts the Gricean maxim of manner, which demands clarity. Its effect is to block the usual way of thinking and increase the difficulty and length of cognitive perception, since, according to formalist critic Shklovsky, "the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (12). By slowing down the process of interpretation, ambiguity induces an act of uniquely intense intellectual focusing on the part of the reader.

The effect of ambiguity is chiefly intellectual, and in this respect it is different from some other aesthetic values with a complex effect, such as sublime and grotesque. Besides surprise the sublime invokes the mixed effect of fear, adoration and power; the grotesque invokes comic, tragic and pathetic effects in combination. Ambiguity, however, is a device which makes the reader construct sense through

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highly focused attention, where the effect derives from reflection, and step-by-step working out of meaning. When faced with ambiguity, the reader does not respond with mixed emotions towards the subject; rather they are led to contemplate on the alternative interpretations with the choice to remain ultimately divided.

**Reader types and reader responses.** In respect of the shared background knowledge there are two distinct types of readers in relation to Patmore's ballad. One type could be called the "informed reader," who is familiar with all the contexts including the 1844 poem, and regards the ballad as an adaptation of a known story established as a literary subject by the 1844 poem. Coventry Patmore's treatment of his own former subject is similar to the Pre-Raphaelite artists' relationship to literary subjects in their paintings, as they elaborated on, developed and interpreted those subjects for their own needs. Whatever their source the scenes represented were aimed to register moments of psychological intensity. In a similar vein, Patmore's ballad makes demand for the viewer by requiring him to engage with the psychology of Maud in the present situation, as out of the 19 stanzas of the ballad 9 are related to it. When faced with the 1888 ballad, this reader understands that the old story is now transformed into a more compact form, a ballad, regards its indeterminacies and ambiguities as ways of implicitness characteristic of the genre, and thus may follow the actual happenings of the storyline without experiencing uncertainty.

It is perhaps more interesting to examine what the effects of ambiguity are in the reading process of the 1888 text, since modern readers are only familiar with the ballad text, the single one authorized for publication. For this "intended reader," ambiguity acts as a means by which the ballad engages the reader's imagination, who is left to his own resources to oscillate between the alternative meanings, and to produce a possible conclusion. These are some of the possible contemplations.

The referential uncertainty in stanza 11 blocks interpretation by leading the reader to think, and try to decide whether the child is anaphoric (referring to Maud) or exophoric (referring to Maud's unborn child), and this reflection on the ambiguity of reference allows the association that in fact both referents are children. Maud, the child of her father, an innocent, unsuspecting young girl seduced and abandoned is thus put at the same level as her innocent baby. The referential uncertainty of "shame" works in a similar way. The reader is led to contemplate, and in effect to realize the inhumanity of the social moral principles that regard either an illegitimate child or illegitimate pregnancy as "shame." Rejection of this opinion undercuts judgement, and invites sympathy for the victim of such false social morals. The ambiguity makes the reader regard Maud and her baby, either unborn or newborn, together, in unity, rather than form a moral judgement. Suicide, infanticide and madness could all happen to women who "fell"

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like Maud. Finally, as the technique of art's goal is to prolong the process of perception, the ambiguous phrase "her arms fall down" leads the reader to visualize the act in order to imagine how it might refer to infanticide. The phrase seems to suggest that Maud just releases the child in despair, as if yielding it to the stream, rather than throw it in the water in an act of violence. However, if the same phrase is meant to refer to suicide, the act of falling down allows the association of helplessness, which makes Maud appear a victim rather than a woman performing a determined and violent suicidal act.

The reader regards the ambiguous phrases or images as of key importance, responds to them with contemplation to face bravely the uncertainty regarding facts, and works out individual interpretations concerning the situations in the poem.

## 8. Conclusion

Keats regarded the capacity of enduring uncertainty as a sign of human greatness, and created his term "negative capability" with a philosophical sense. However, as design in poetry, ambiguity appeals to the same human capacity. Ambiguity generates a state of intentional open-mindedness, as it retains uncertainty by inviting a suspension of choice and decision. It is also a device that keeps the reader alert to complexity of meanings. Although rooted in the semantic level, it cannot be resolved by contexts. Contextual considerations can only further extend and refine the possible interpretations.

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