Abstract (E): This article aims at interpreting Medusa as an intrinsically ambiguous figure. Taking Freud as a starting-point I will analyse in what way Medusa represents what may not be represented; how she wanders in a territory that belongs to both death and life, male and female, order and chaos, the visible and the invisible. In a broad reading of Harry Mulisch's The Procedure I will explore the traces left by this snaky head on contemporary literature.

Abstract (F): Dans cet article nous voudrions interpréter la Méduse comme une figure essentiellement ambiguë. A partir de Freud, ns nous intéresserons plus particulièrement à la façon dont la Méduse représente ce qui échappe à la représentation, comment elle évolue dans un univers qui relève à la fois de la vie et de la mort, du masculin et du féminin, de l'ordre et du chaos, du visible et de l'invisible. L'analyse d'un texte de Harry Mulisch, La Procédure (De Procedure), nous examinerons encore quelques traces de la tête à serpents dans la littérature contemporaine.

Keywords: Medusa, mythology, Freud, Mulisch

If we feel like it, we can produce a waxworks of created fabulous creatures, which were previously reserved for fantasy: chimeras, basilisks, unicorns, dragons, griffins, centaurs, sphinxes, everything humanly mankind has ever dreamed of.

'Or a woman with snakes instead of hair!'

'We'll do that.'

(Harry Mulisch, The Procedure: 115)

1. Medusa in History and Mythology

Among the mythological figures that have come down to us from Antiquity, Medusa occupies a principal position. Throughout the ages she shows up in the cultural, social and political ideologies of each period, continually adapting herself to the ever-changing landscape surrounding her. Understandably, her presence is not always explicit, sometimes she stays hidden in the bushes, like a snake. Finally, it is hardly a surprise that, depending on the accents and perspectives, several interpretations can be ascribed to the archetype which do not necessarily have to exclude one another. Although it may seem that Medusa has largely disappeared from the scene since the beginning of the twentieth century and the emergence of psychoanalysis, her implicit presence and power can still be felt in several domains. After an analysis of the figure of Medusa, I will briefly illustrate this thesis, with reference to a recent
In a short note about Medusa, Freud traces the psychoanalytical aspects behind the myth. He considers Medusa's decapitation as the visualisation of the castration complex. When the little boy faces the female genitals for the first time, he realises that the possession of his penis apparently cannot be taken for granted. His mother's genitals present themselves as a threatening factor feeding his castration anxiety. Likewise, when the Medusa head suddenly emerges and ruthlessly intrudes upon the observer. It has a devastating effect on those who dare to throw a glimpse on the spectacle; immediate petrifaction follows even the merest glance. Medusa's impact on the observer is paralysing, almost catatonic. According to the psychoanalytic explanation, the subject is struck dumb by the sight of the female genitals. Freud, perhaps somewhat overinterpreting, extrapolates the literal mythological petrifaction to the erection of the penis. The erection is not merely a sign of affirmation towards the other, in the first place it is a sign of self-affirmation, just as several species of animals enlarge themselves in the confrontation with potential enemies. Freud interprets the snakes sliding over Medusa's head as phallic symbols. Because of their substituting function and the ensuing familiarity they supposedly would alleviate the fear for the male observer.

Freud's notes concerning the Medusa myth are no more than a few footnotes; loosely arranged remarks raising more questions than offering clarifications. Yet the text presents a number of interesting starting-points. The image of petrifaction symbolising an erection may seem a bit farfetched - bearing in mind that the metamorphosis of organic beings into inorganic rock is a very common theme in classical mythology - it still touches on the heart of the ambiguity that to my mind characterises the whole Medusa figure. Medusa's male observer is struck dumb for two reasons: he is enthralled by the Freudian castration fear on the one hand, and by his sexual fascination on the other. Medusa repels and attracts at the same time. She is a snake monster but equally a femme fatale. She unites the beauty and the beast.

The sexual connotation we ascribe to Medusa is not merely Freud's invention. No one less than Ovid makes the association with her sexuality in his opus magnum Metamorphoses at the beginning of our calendar.

But one of the princes asked him why Medusa only of the sisters wore serpents mingled with her hair. The guest [i.e. Perseus] replied: “Since what you ask is a tale well worth the telling, hear then the cause. She was once most beautiful in form, and the jealous hope of many suitors. Of all her beauties, her hair was the most beautiful - for so I learned from one who said he had seen her. ‘Tis said that in Minerva's temple Neptune, lord of the Ocean, ravished her. Jove's daughter turned away and hid her chaste eyes behind her aegis. And, that the deed might be punished as was due, she changed the Gorgon's locks to ugly snakes. And now to frighten her fear-numbed foes, she still wears upon her breast the snakes which she has made.” (Ovid, Book IV: vs. 791-803)

As the excerpt makes clear, Minerva recuperates the Medusa head and its paralysing power. Who else than the virgin goddess with her chaste eyes, in Greece celebrated as Pallas Athena, can claim the magic cloak? The snakes on the Medusa head prove to be an extremely efficient protection of her sexuality. The shift from the sexual to the visual scope is also explicit in the comparison of Medusa with the myth of Baubo, dealing with a female body without
head or breast, with the face on the belly. Surrounded by hair this ‘face’ refers to the female genitals even more explicitly. Whereas Medusa is a visualised vulva, the myth of Baubo represents the reverse direction from face to belly. (Clair: 43-50)

One last example of the sexualisation of Medusa, perhaps somewhat closer to home, can be found in contemporary medical terminology. Beside a number of other meanings, Medusa also lends her name to the medical denotation of a wreath-shaped distension of the veins around the navel. The twisting course of veins is indeed reminiscent of the movement of snakes, but again we are dealing with a switch of the upper body to the lower body in the medical area.

Medusa is literally and figuratively an ambiguous being. She is the only one of the Gorgones that is not immortal, but she is not human either. Staying at the gates of Hades she lingers in the twilight zone between life and death. She represents a no man's land between the visible and the invisible, between order and chaos or ratio and folly. Medusa is an anthropomorphic and humanised monster. Depending on the period the serpent woman is pictured differently. She makes her appearance most often in turbulent eras, periods in which human knowledge and the belief in ratio are being questioned. Then she represents chaos subjecting mankind to the massive rocks of nature. When man is living in the illusion that he can dominate chaos by means of reason, in the arts of that era Medusa takes on the role of a charming and attractive woman. She is, however, not always equally feminine. Quite often the creature also possesses male characteristics, which only confirms her ambiguous nature. (Kristeva)

The beauty of the female genitals excites terror too and, as suggested above, fear. Apart from the well-known castration anxiety, the face of the Medusa head shows the gloomy, uncanny outlines of death as well. Our culture, after all, is loaded with illustrations in which eroticism and sexuality are framed in a morbid atmosphere. The orgiastic rapture, which very often assumes a religious, metaphysical mood, is a prefiguration of death, it leads us to the frontier between life and death, the territory in which Medusa dwells. For the vagina reminds man of the gate to his existence, it is the ontological threshold. That is why this experience is so uncanny, in the ambiguous meaning that Freud ascribes to the concept. (Freud: 241-74) The confrontation with the vagina implies a return to what is most familiar yet should have remained hidden. Sexuality not only means procreation, it also involves loss and the recollection of transience. The Self is lost in sexuality, just as some insects eat the male after copulation. Medusa symbolises this existential fear. The life that she, like any woman, engenders is doomed to die too. Medusa reminds us of our past, of the primitive mother to whom all access is made impossible, irrevocably ending each return in death.

This perspective is closely related to the philosophy of Georges Bataille. In the type of society that he advocates, one keeps on searching for ritual instinctivity that Nietzsche attributed to the Dionysian. In Bataille's opinion, the goal of every society consists in approaching the dangerous twilight zone of the “Exterior” as closely as possible. This is the territory, the atmosphere of the ecstatic, of the elusive and uncontrollable, where dreams and the unconscious are displayed, a world in which eventually truth and knowledge rule. This realm, which should in the first place be considered a psychic state that is highly comparable to what Antonin Artaud aimed at in his 'Theatre of Cruelty', supposes a complete purity which is only accessible in the most radical way, i.e. an extreme longing, or death. Both options can be regarded as a complete surrender. (De Vos: 75)
violence seule échappe au sentiment de pauvreté de ces expériences réalistes. La mort et le désir ont seuls la force qui oppresse, qui coupe la respiration. L'outrance du désir et de la mort permet seule d'atteindre la vérité. (Bataille: 101)

The ontological uncertainty in which the subject hovers between being and not being is exactly what Medusa represents. Arousing terror and fascination she leads the observer to and often beyond the frontier of petrifaction. Cruelties, war, death, Artaud's plague, are horrifying and gruesome, but in this horror and extreme ugliness a kind of purity and beauty shines through. This can best be illustrated by the ambivalent quality of Medusa's blood: one sample of it is poisonous, while the other is said to have a healing, purifying effect, as we may read in Euripides. (Euripedes: vs. 736-1003-1005) A society that succeeds, says Bataille, in catching the ambiguity of the cruel which consists of "tremendum" and "fascinans", has attained the ideal model. Such a society he calls "acéphale", or headless. Like in the mythology of Baubo, the head shifts to the belly. The snakes sliding over Medusa's skull should also be considered in this light. No doubt twisting snakes are right up Freud's alley, but his interpretation of snakes as a substitute for the penis only makes sense with regard to Medusa's ambiguous nature. The castration fear is alleviated; fright acquires a fascinating touch.

The young man finds Medusa on his way to virility. The threatening image of the snake woman is a metaphor of the mother figure. The growing child has to cope with and eventually to emancipate from his mother's gaze. The separation from the mother leads to the boy's independence and to the liberation of his sexuality. The decapitation of the Medusa can then be seen as the cutting of the umbilical cord. The mythological story hardly casts any doubt on this interpretation. Only after he has slain off Medusa's head, Perseus is capable of liberating Andromeda from her chains to marry her. Need it be said that this young woman symbolises Perseus' sexual potency? The liberty he has gained is even enhanced by Pegasus, the winged horse, which is generated by Medusa's blood. In the myth of Baubo and Demeter we can find a similar passage: Demeter, equally gorgeous as Medusa, is seduced by Poseidon and gives birth to the stallion Arion, again a straightforward symbol of acquired virility.

The early origin of the Medusa throws even more light on the mother-child relationship.5 Already in the Paleolithicum we find images of her, not as a hideous monster though, but as a pre-eminently female goddess. The snakes accompanying her symbolise the eternal cycle of life, death and rebirth. Consider the mythical Ouroboros, eating its own tail: the snake represents the ambiguity of earthiness and underworld on the one hand, and immortality on the other, represented by its casting its skin. Medusa stands for femininity, for the cycle of nature is the cycle of woman, the menstrual cycle. The menstrual blood leads us to the beginning of life and - connected with it - to death. As a matter of fact, primitive peoples believed that watching a menstruating woman would turn them into stone. Etymologically Medusa means "female wisdom", the female mysteries of past, present and future. By uniting the contrasts she transcends all dualities. She brings us back to the source, the source of life and the source of truth, sweeping away all of our illusions.

In the patriarchal society of Ancient Greece, however, a fascinating shift occurs in the symbolism around Medusa. A symbol of female power and wisdom was out of the question, and step by step her natural powers of creativity, destruction and regeneration were demonised. Originally, Medusa together with Metis made up the trinity of Athens. As a 'rising goddess' Athens was soon enough
exonerated from this impure, unchaste side and split up into Metis, who was to become Athens's mother, and Medusa, who was allotted the role of Athens's enemy. As a chaste but highly masculine goddess Athens renounces these old bonds and relationships, as we read in the Oresteia.

Mother is none that gave my Godhead life; / I am the male's; saving my never-wed / Virginity, my Father's child thrice o'er. / Therefore I rate not high a woman's death / That slew her lord, the master of her house. (Aeschylles: vs. 736-40)

Still, some recollections of her past life have not been rooted out; the owl that accompanies Athens reminds us of the wisdom and the power of regeneration that the goddess has inherited from Medusa. Medusa, now willy-nilly Athens's opponent, equalled her in feminine beauty, and her love game with Poseidon is severely punished by Athens. So Medusa's metamorphosis and the assistance that Athens offers Perseus, is in fact no less than an action aimed against her own mother. It goes without saying that feminists have often interpreted Medusa's decapitation as the dictatorship of man silencing the female element. (Cixous: 875-93)

In order to avoid petrifaction Perseus makes use of his shield as a mirror to decapitate Medusa. On pain of self-destruction, he cannot look at the snake head. However, a major problem concerning the Medusa question arises here. All of Freud's texts are centred on what has been called the ego, the self, the subject. The same holds true for "Medusa's Head". Freud's psychoanalysis investigates the unconscious in order to find an explanation for the very enigmatic phenomenon of Medusa, to examine the grounds underlying the petrifaction. This leads me to the fundamental question: what or who gives rise to the process of petrifaction? Is it the magical-supernatural gaze of Medusa herself, or is the moving spirit behind the metamorphosis to be situated in the act of looking? In other words, who is the actual actor? Who is subject and who is object? Psychoanalysts tend to place all responsibility for the petrifaction within the observer himself. Following this line of thought we have to conclude that Medusa is a projection of one's own psyche. She is the self, which cannot be looked at. Medusa is characterised by an uncanny aspect that was supposed to remain hidden. Here as well, she displays the ambiguity that is inherent in her nature, the ambiguity between the interior and the exterior. In this light we must consider her gaze carefully. For who is, eventually, looking at whom? Who observes whom? Who kills whom?

The confrontation with Medusa marks an epiphany; in this moment the observer comes to know himself, he is forced to introspection. The misshapen creature staring at him has an alienating impact on him, at first sight because of their completely different looks. However, this is deceptive. Introspection leads, after all, to the discovery and recognition of the self. One realises that one is not the god one thought oneself to be, but rather a monster that - above all - cannot escape the process of transience. In Medusa one recognises oneself and one's own mortality: aye, there's the rub.

Perseus' assignment is a game of reflections, a game of seeing and not seeing, a game of seeing or being seen. I have already suggested that the Medusa head is in fact a visualisation of the female genitals. The preoccupation with the sex is displaced to the eye, which is an equally vulnerable organ as the penis. The blinding, the castration and the decapitation can in this way be considered as a trinity. The task that Perseus has to fulfil demands the utmost wariness. Using his shield, he has to see without being seen. The risk of petrifaction is continually lurking. He has to be extremely cautious, constantly on the guard with eagle's eyes - the French word 're-garder' is illuminating in this respect. This vigilance
is necessary to make sure that one is not being followed or threatened. The caution and guardedness, carried to the utmost limit, oblige the person involved to take on the unconditional role of subject; he is the seer, yet, if he turns into the object of the act of seeing, he is irretrievably lost. The immediate petrifaction is the sole ruthless answer that hangs like a sword of Damocles above the players of this morbid game. In the Old Testament, Loth's wife has to pay when, fleeing from her burning village, she casts a glance over her shoulder; at once she is turned into a pillar of salt. In classical mythology, Orpheus, otherwise so clever, cannot control himself in taking a quick look at his wife Euridice, hereby breaking his promise to Hades and losing her forever. Innumerable other legends, myths and fairy tales deal with a similar theme. Often the woman is subjected to a metamorphoses that should be kept secret to her husband, who is most of the times well aware of what is happening and knows that he is not allowed to watch the scene. However, curiosity wins over reason and the uncanny once again moves in when the secret is revealed. Usually the husband's violation of his oath also marks his wife's death. From the moment she is subjected to the observation and is turned into an object, she is defeated.

Nevertheless, seeing also implies looking backward, but is it possible at all to see without being seen when it concerns one's own psyche? Is it possible to look at one's own death and castration fears from a distance? Are these hidden fears not thrown in our faces at the moment that we are being confronted with the uncanny, so that we find ourselves face to face with them? We are left with no other fate than blind perplexity. The story of the Creation tells us how Adam and Eve took a bite out of the apple but "the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked" (Gen. 3:7). Their ability to see reveals their sexuality, but simultaneously it obliges them to face their previous state of bliss, to face what they no longer are.

2. Medusa in Contemporary Literature: The Case of The Procedure

Obviously, an archetype like that of Medusa has remained latently present and is interpreted differently according to the ruling ideologies of a culture and society. To illustrate this, I will briefly discuss one of Harry Mulisch's novels, The Procedure from a Medusan perspective. The main character in the book, Victor Werker, a world-famous biologist, has succeeded in creating an eobiont, i.e. creating a living being out of an inorganic substance. A modern God disposing of the creative power he seems to have everything under control. However, his personal life acts as the counterpoise. His wife Clara has left him after he had run away at his daughter's birth, which had died in the womb. Victor's creation is compared to some other creations; there is, of course, the meta-narrative thread of the literary work itself as a creation. Intertextual references are made to Genesis and to Frankenstein. Moreover, the theme of judaism - recurrent in Mulisch's oeuvre - is raised. A separate chapter is devoted to the creation of a golem, a human being moulded out of clay by the rabbis Löw and Isaac. This story relates a number of striking parallels to the story of Werker. Isaac and Löw's golem is situated in the sixteenth century. As I will make clear, this golem displays some striking Medusan characteristics. Löw, moulding the clay into a golem, takes Isaac as a model. As a consequence, the golem is turned into Isaac's mirror image. At the end of the production process the only thing left to be done is: "The penis. He can't see Isaac's and he doesn't want to, - even Esther seldom got to see it."(Mulisch: 45) Indeed, after he has become the
father of triplets, the rabbi Isaac no longer feels any urge to go to
great pains in his sexual activities. Is it any wonder, then, that the
golem, once brought to life, appears not to be a man but a woman?
Löw breaks off the clay lifeless penis and the golem becomes a
reflection of Isaac, more particularly of his castration anxiety that
restrains him from any sexual intercourse with his wife Esther.6

Almost immediately, our attention is drawn to the golem's gaze:
"Löw has never seen such a look. It's as though he's looking into a
pitch-black cellar. Isaac can't take his eyes off the slim, boyish
body, which was modeled after his own" (50). Despite the fear that
the golem arouses, Isaac is fascinated by this Medusa image. The
gaze inspiring him with dread keeps exerting its attractive power
further on too: "She nods and continues to look at him with her
dark, frightening eyes. It suddenly strikes him that she does not
blink." (Mulisch: 51)

This is Medusa's gaze: the stress on the last detail evokes the
mythical woman's frozen, penetrating eyes which do not blink either.
Terror and curiosity go hand in hand. Because Esther has
eventually left Isaac, taking the children with her and leaving Isaac
with an empty nursery, he proposes the golem shelter for the night.
In a few words it is suggested that he assaulted her there. The
consequences are Medusa-like in their ruthlessness; erotic
attraction is followed by total destruction, be it not petrifaction in this
case, but murder. After her bloody knifing, she remains standing
there with the knife in her hand, while a crowd is gathering around
the scene. However: "Kept at a distance by the look in her eyes, no
one dares to approach her" (Mulisch: 52). How much greater can
the paralysing effect she exerts be? Equally interesting are the
Hebrew letters that are engraved in the golem's brow; at the
moment of her creation the inscription reads eMeT, meaning 'truth'.

After the murder of Isaac Löw wants to disarm her.

Löw puts the tip of the knife on the aleph and looks deep
into the night of her eyes. It 's as though he remembers
something from long, long ago, from before his birth…A
sob escapes from his breast, and with a rapid movement
he flips the aleph away, so that the word "truth" changes
to "death"…MeT. At the same instant her eyes grow
dull, her face begins to crumble [...]. (Mulisch: 52)

The countenance of the Medusan golem also leads Löw back to the
source of life and death, which I stipulated above. On top of that,
"MeT" is also Egyptian for ... Medusa.

More than one parallel can be drawn between Isaac in the sixteenth
and Victor Werker in the twentieth century. Briefly put, both are left
by their wife and child(ren), both find themselves face to face with
Medusa and eventually, both must pay for it with their lives. A
recurrent motif is the empty nursery. Both Isaac and Victor
experience a sense of lack that is rooted in their disability as a man
to give birth to children. Haunted by this idea, they search for a
substitute that they eventually find in the arts (a train of thought that
becomes explicit at the end of the novel in a debate among several
art big-shots). Isaac creates a golem, Victor basically makes the
same thing: an eobiont. In both cases the Medusan or even
Bataillian frontier of death and life, of being and not-being, is being
eliminated. The two men create, in a completely different context,
their own, personal Medusa.

Victor's goal is the realisation of the impossible: absolute control
over life and death. He wants to erase the frontier between the two
by means of his eobiont. He wants to conquer Medusa, which is
only possible by removing the terrifying effect she brings about. In
order to attain this, one must at all times be prepared for her arrival.
And what better way is there for Victor to reach his goal than to
create the Medusa himself, whenever he is willing to? But he is
caught in his own trap. He looks back and finds Medusa on his way. At once he is paralysed. At forty, the creation of the eobiont marks the end of his career. His name will forever be associated with his product, whatever else he might still invent or discover. His relationship with Clara has come to an end as well. She has left him, after his daughter Aurora had previously done the same. Why did Victor at the moment of the delivery run out of the room? The answer is not difficult to figure out: Aurora died without being actually born. Through this she has destroyed the natural logic and frontier, thus accomplishing the impossible. She comes, just as Medusa, just as the eobiont, just as the golem, from the no man's land between life and death. He regards her as "something monstrous" (Mulisch: 149), a "monster" (Mulisch: 183), which will haunt him for the rest of his life, reminding him of a distant past, when he himself, only eight years old, was left by his mother. Victor himself hints at this explanation, time and again referring to Freud in his considerations. He thinks that he has everything under control, but is constantly overtaken by events, unaware of the reality that he himself is the victim. Another exemplary passage here is the murder conspiracy, that he witnesses by accident. Obsessively, he tries to solve it, unknowing that he himself is the aimed at victim. Victor thinks that he sees, but alas, he is being seen.

Is it justified to catch Medusa where she does not explicitly appear, in spite of one passage where she is actually named, which I have quoted as a motto, introducing my article? I am convinced that the question can be answered in the affirmative, as long as we do not have to regard Medusa literally as a misshapen monster covered with snakes, but as an archetype that suddenly merges and confronts us with a past that we wanted to erase from our memory. A mirror of our psyche. Besides, Mulisch has always been preoccupied with the genius of the writer, equalling the writing of a book with the creation of the world. This congruency puts the coming into the literary world on a par with the world's genesis. Particularly The Procedure deals extensively with the motif of the creatio ex nihilo, which ties in with the Lacanian concept of the symbolic castration. The law of the symbolic is groundless and inexplicable; rationality is lost when it comes to a legitimisation of the law itself. The obsession with a clear-cut categorisation based on dual differences runs throughout the novel. Distinctions of life/death, presence/absence, male/female and light/dark at all costs need to be maintained. Since Lacan links up this logocentricism with western paternal superiority (it is, after all, the Name-of-the-Father allowing the subject its entry into language, the symbolic order, and thus making it acquainted with the culturally inherited binary oppositions) feminists soon came to speak of 'phallogocentricism'. Dwelling in the space between these distinctions, on the fringe of mankind's existence, Medusa represents the unrepresentable, the highly ambiguous crepuscular zone that arouses both fear and fascination. With her appearance she touches ont what Lacan calls the real: that which does not belong to the symbolic order. Or, tracing it back to Freud, Medusa marks the uncanny popping up again. The repressed chaos that cannot be dealt with, that language is incapable of grasping, shows up in the pursuit of the truth. With the creation of respectively an eobiont and a golem Victor and Löw and Isaac exactly aim at this pursuit, which will, however, end in destruction. This devastating effect belongs to the figure of Medusa, albeit that her straightforward appearance is not necessitated to remain present. She is, after all, mostly shrouded in shades.

References

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Notes

1. A socio-political interpretation of Medusa with regard to France at the end of the 19th century is offered by Neil Hertz in "Medusa's Head: male hysteria under political pressure".
3. Clair approaches the ambiguity of the Medusa head mostly from an art-historical perspective.
4. In Writing and Difference Jacques Derrida has pointed out that it is not at all improbable that Artaud has been influenced by Freud's writings in his theory of a hieratic Theatre of Cruelty, which refuses to be a re-presentation of life. It is remarkable how much Artaud and Freud make use of the same terminology, centred on the essence of dream and hieroglyphs. (Derrida: 232-50)
5. See the internet site: http://ww.perseus.tufts.edu/classes/finalp.html
6. It would take us too far to provide an extensive analysis of the novel here. We are not told in black and white where Isaac's castration anxiety finds its origins. The narrator never enters into Isaac's childhood. Yet, taking into account the many parallels between Isaac's family situation and that of Victor, it seems justified to extrapolate Victor's traumatic past (i.e. the separation from his mother) to Isaac's youth.

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Another definition of ambiguity is forwarded by Hartmann and Stork (1976:11) who state that ambiguity is a construction which admits more than one interpretation. An instance is "Patent medicines are sold by frightening people". The ambiguity arises due to the fact that we cannot tell whether the sense intended is "Patent medicines are sold by putting fear into people" or "Patent medicines are sold by people who are frightening".

What Does Language Ambiguity Mean?

Something is ambiguous when it can be understood in two or more possible senses or ways. The system developers then write procedures that compute the most likely resolutions of the ambiguities, given the words or word classes and other easily determined conditions. The reality is that there is no operational computer system capable of determining the intended meanings of words in discourse exists today.

It can be seen, therefore, that ambiguity in language is both a blessing and a curse. I would like to say, together with Pablo Neruda, "Ambiguity, I love you because I don't love you."