UNIT 6: D.H. LAWRENCE: “SNAKE”

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6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- gain an insight into the life and works of the English poet D.H. Lawrence
- explain both the content and context of the poem “Snake”
- explore the relevant themes pertaining to the poem
- grasp the style and language employed in the text of the poem

6.2 INTRODUCTION

The present unit introduces the learner to the remarkable 20th century English novelist and poet D. H. Lawrence and presents a detailed study of one of his widely anthologised poems titled “Snake”. The range of his literary work includes novels, novellas, short-stories, essays, poems, plays, and travel narratives as well. Despite the widespread literary criticism and political controversies that Lawrence had confronted during his writing career, eventually his literary worth and credibility had received its due share of

recognition, as also highly noted by writers like E.M. Forster and F.R. Leavis. Lawrence was better known as an English novelist although he excelled in all forms of writings as is also visible from the range of his works. Lawrence wrote poetry prior to starting out as a writer and his first poems had been published in *The English Review* titled as "Dreams Old" and "Dreams Nascent". All together, his poetical output comprised a total of around eight hundred poems. As a writer, Lawrence was a perfectionist when it came to revising and editing his works for publication. Moreover, he was also an excellent painter who held a lifelong passion for oil painting.

6.3 D.H. LAWRENCE: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Let us then explore the life and works of one of the most prominent writers of the 20th century, D.H. Lawrence.

6.3.1 His Life

Dereck Herbert Richards Lawrence (1885-1930) was born to Arthur John Lawrence and Lydia Beardsall in a humble working class family. He was brought up in the mining town of Eastwood, Nottinghamshire where his father had served as a coal miner. You can well imagine how difficult and challenging is the life of coal miners who work and extract coal in the gloomy underground tunnels. Thus the Lawrence family had to work hard in order to meet their needs. As a young boy, Lawrence had seen much trouble in the early part of his life, fragments of which are captured in the best of his literary works.

He received his early education at the Beauvale Board School and the Nottingham High School on scholarship. Although he was not really inclined towards studies, his mother inculcated in him a lifelong love of books, music and literature. After having finished his school education, he briefly worked at the Haywood's surgical appliances factory and then joined the British School, Eastwood as a pupil teacher. And in the due course of time, he went on to receive a teaching certificate from the University College of Nottingham. With the sprouting of his literary abilities, he had begun to

write and publish some of his early works which comprised poems, short stories and fiction. As a young man who had only started his writing pursuits, Lawrence suffered a huge setback in life when he lost his mother with whom he had shared a special bond. After the publication of his second novel, he had suffered a second bout of pneumonia but very soon decided to give up teaching in order to pursue his passion in writing.

During this phase of his life, he had also eloped with Frieda Weekly (who had three children from her first marriage) to Germany, where the couple married later in 1914. Together they travelled and spent considerable time in Italy and London where the couple also met the modern short-story writer Katherine Mansfield and the Welsh poet W.H. Davies. While in London, he also met modernist poets Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. He was mistakenly charged of being a spy during wartime and this had proved to be a difficult phase for the writer. Further, it also led him to take voluntary exile from England which is why, the couple travelled across countries right from Italy to France, Sicily to Germany, Austria to Australia and Mexico to Sri Lanka. These travels had enriched his literary narratives to a great extent.

6.3.2 His Works

Some of the best works of fiction by Lawrence are *The White Peacock* (1911), *The Trespasser* (1912), *Sons and Lovers* (1913), *The Rainbow* (1915), *Women in Love* (1920), *The Lost Girl* (1920), *Aaron's Rod* (1922), *Kangaroo* (1923), *The Boy in the Bush* (1924), *The Plumed Serpent* (1926), *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) and *The Escaped Cock* (1929). The anthologies of poetry are titled *Love Poems and Others* (1913), *Amores* (1916), *Look! We Have Come Through!* (1917), *New Poems* (1918), *Bay: A Book of Poems* (1919), *Tortoises* (1921), *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (1923), *Pansies* (1929) and *Nettles* (1930).

The learner may try reading some of his short stories from anthologies such as *The Prussian Officer and Other Stories* (1914), *England, My England and Other Stories* (1922), *The Fox, the Captain's Doll, The Ladybird* (1923), *The Woman Who Rode Away and Other Stories* (1928) or *Love*

Among the Haystacks and Other Stories (1930). A few of the widely read short stories of Lawrence are: "The Captain's Doll", "The Fox", "The Ladybird" and "Odour of Chrysanthemums". Lawrence had also written a few plays namely *The Daughter-in-Law* (1912), *The Widowing of Mrs. Holroyd* (1914), *Touch and Go* (1920), *David* (1926), *The Fight for Barbara* (1933), *A Collier's Friday Night* (1934), *The Married Man* (1940) and *The Merry-Go-Round* (1941). His travels across continents are well documented in his travel narratives such as *Twilight in Italy and Other Essays* (1916), *Sea and Sardinia* (1921), *Mornings in Mexico and Other Essays* (1927) and *Sketches of Etruscan Places and Other Italian Essays* (1932).

Despite the financial difficulties and socio-political challenges in the journey of his life and career, Lawrence continued to write and publish the best of his works. Lawrence spent his final years writing and struggling with illness. He breathed his last on March 2, 1930 after suffering from tuberculosis and his ashes were interred at a chapel in New Mexico.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Write a few words on about the birthplace and early years of D.H. Lawrence.

Q2. Name some of the best works of fiction by D.H. Lawrence.

Q3. Name a few of the widely read short stories by D.H. Lawrence.

6.4 THE TEXT OF THE POEM

The poem "Snake" was first published in the collection *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (1923) which was written in Sicily. Let us briefly read through the text of the poem before we explore its meaning and emerging themes and ideas.

"Snake"

A snake came to my water-**trough**
On a hot, hot day, and I in pyjamas for the heat,
To drink there.
In the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob-tree



Trough: a long narrow storage that holds water
pitcher: a pot to fill water



Trailed: (a snake) that slides and leaves signs of its movement on the ground or grass
Slackness: in a relaxed position
Flickered: make small quick movements (with the forked tongue)
Mused: to consider something thoughtfully
Stooped: to bend downwards
Venomous: poisonous
Confessed: admit
Pacified: bring peace
Bowels: the deepest part of something
Perversity: a deliberate desire to behave in an unreasonable way against accepted standards

I came down the steps with my **pitcher**
And must wait, must stand and wait, for there he was at the trough before me.
He reached down from a **fissure** in the earth-wall in the gloom
And **trailed** his yellow-brown **slackness** soft-bellied down, over the edge of
the stone trough
And rested his throat upon the stone bottom,
And where the water had dripped from the tap, in a small clearness,
He sipped with his straight mouth,
Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack long body,
Silently.
Someone was before me at my water-trough,
And I, like a second comer, waiting.
He lifted his head from his drinking, as cattle do,
And looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do,
And **flickered** his two-forked tongue from his lips, and **mused** a moment,
And **stooped** and drank a little more,
Being earth-brown, earth-golden from the burning bowels of the earth
On the day of Sicilian July, with Etna smoking.
The voice of my education said to me
He must be killed,
For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are **venomous**.
And voices in me said, If you were a man
You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off.
But must I **confess** how I liked him,
How glad I was he had come like a guest in quiet, to drink at my water-trough
And depart peaceful, **pacified**, and thankless,
Into the burning **bowels** of this earth?
Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him?
Was it **perversity**, that I longed to talk to him?
Was it humility, to feel so honoured?
I felt so honoured.

And yet those voices:

If you were not afraid, you would kill him!

And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid, But even so, honoured still more

That he should seek my **hospitality**

From out the dark door of the secret earth. (metaphor)

He drank enough

And lifted his head, dreamily, as one who has drunken,

And flickered his tongue like a forked night on the air, so black,

Seeming to lick his lips,

And looked around like a god, unseeing, into the air,

And slowly turned his head,

And slowly, very slowly, as if thrice adream,

Proceeded to draw his slow length curving round

And climb again the broken bank of my wall-face.

And as he put his head into that dreadful hole,

And as he slowly drew up, snake-easing his shoulders, and entered farther,

A sort of horror, a sort of protest against his withdrawing into that **horrid** black hole,

Deliberately going into the blackness, and slowly drawing himself after,

Overcame me now his back was turned.

I looked round, I put down my pitcher,

I picked up a **clumsy log**

And threw it at the water-trough with a **clatter**.

I think it did not hit him,

But suddenly that part of him that was left behind **convulsed** in undignified **haste**.

Writhed like lightning, and was gone

Into the black hole, the earth-lipped **fissure** in the wall-front,

At which, in the intense still noon, I stared with fascination.

And immediately I regretted it.

I thought how **paltry**, how **vulgar**, what a mean act!

I despised myself and the voices of my **accursed** human education.



Hospitality: the friendly and generous reception of guests, visitors or strangers

Horrid: unpleasant or horrible

Deliberately: on purpose

Clumsy: awkward in movement or in handling things

Log: a chunk of wood

Clatter: a loud sound particularly that of a utensil

Convulsed: shake uncontrollably or shudder (out of fear)

Haste: in a hurry

Writhed: making twisted movements in great discomfort

Fissure: a split or crack, narrow opening

Paltry: very small or meager

Vulgar: meaning thoughts or actions that are unrefined

Accursed: under a curse; also expressing a strong dislike of a situation or condition

Albatross: a white ocean bird with a long span of wings

Exile: the act of retreating or moving away
Expatiate: make amendments for improper actions
Pettiness: mean or unkind in small things, showing narrow ideas

And I thought of the **albatross**
And I wished he would come back, my snake.
For he seemed to me again like a king,
Like a king in **exile**, uncrowned in the underworld,
Now due to be crowned again.
And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords
Of life.
And I have something to **expiate**:
A **pettiness**.
(Taormina, 1923)



LET US KNOW

Georgian Poets: The Georgian poets of the 20th century comprised a group of English poets such as Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves, Walter de la Mare, William Henry Davies, Siegfried Sassoon, John Drinkwater, Edmund Charles Blunden among a few others and D.H. Lawrence as well. They were interested in introducing newness in English poetry through expressions of lyrical romanticism and their writings coincided with the new reign of George V in 1910. The period between the years 1911-1922 was a fertile period for Georgian poets and their writings.

6.4.1 The Explanation of the Poem

In the opening line of the poem, the first image that we receive is that of a 'snake' as observed by the narrator at a close distance. The snake in its thirst for water on a burning hot day, takes a drink at the water trough. You may perhaps imagine a snake relieving its thirst under the shade of a tree well before anyone would approach a water trough. Thus, the narrator is taken by surprise at the unexpected sight and stands at a safe distance waiting and watching the snake under the shade of a "strange-scented" carob tree. Now, the carob is an evergreen tree that boasts of a broad leafy crown, a thick trunk and strong branches that bear brown bean pods. You may find it interesting to know that cakes, cookies or chocolates are made

from 'carob powder' that is produced from the seeds of the bean pods (much like cocoa powder). Here, the snake is seen enjoying its right of being the first at the water trough and keeping a person on hold while it partakes of its share of drink.

The narrator waits with a pitcher and speculates on how the yellowish brown snake must have crawled out from the crack in a mud wall and slithered to the edge of the stone trough on its soft under belly, resting its throat on the trough for a drink of water. The trough described in the poem is probably made up of stone and cement, which acts like a storage of water from the taps. Here the snake rests its throat on the stone bottom to sip the water softly, without a sound and to relieve its thirst. While the narrator describes the entire scene, one can almost feel the shade of the carob tree, the silence of the surroundings outside and the water running through the long body of the snake. And the narrator almost immediately personifies the snake with the use of the term "someone" who reaches the trough a little earlier than the "second comer" who has to wait for his turn.

Then, suddenly the snake lifts its crown from the trough and becomes aware of the narrator's presence. At this moment, the snake only flicks its forked tongue to sense its immediate surroundings, almost gazing at the narrator for a few seconds. The snake had been the subject of the narrator's observation so far but now, the narrator becomes the subject of the snake's observation. As it sensed no danger in the narrator's presence, it took another drink of water. The snake is described as earthy probably owing to its down-to-earth nature and also its earth-brown or earth-golden colour. It seems as though the snake had almost appeared from the burning belly of the earth itself. In all probability we can imagine this entire scene in our own Indian context with which we are familiar but the present location of the poem is in a place known as Sicily, in Italy. Sicily is an independent island in southern Italy and towards the east coast of Sicily lies an active volcano known as Mount Etna. Although, a series of eruptions have occurred here, the last being in December 2015, the city Catania or town of Taormina (where the poem had been written) are both well-populated and popular tourist spots as well. Owing to these reasons, the poet talks of "Sicilian July" month and the "smoking" Mount Etna.

While the snake went about its normal activity without being disturbed or causing any form of disturbance, the narrator’s mind becomes preoccupied with thoughts of disturbing the snake from its place. This, the narrator felt was his rational mind and his education that had unconsciously trained his mind to think in this manner. Thus, one can easily note the difference in behaviour of the snake which held a calm composure and the narrator who had unknowingly turned into a potential danger. The poet then reasons that unlike the harmless black snakes in Italy, the golden ones were venomous which only justified it’s killing. His manly instincts directed him to act rationally and kill the snake. But, the narrator also admits how he had a liking for this silent guest who had quietly taken a drink from the trough and left peacefully after satisfying its thirst. The narrator tried to examine his mind, to search for the reasons that had stopped him from killing the snake. He questions himself on whether it is his lack of courage or whether it was his fascination of the snake. Whatever the reasons were, the narrator reiterates that he had somehow felt honoured to have had the chance of being hospitable to a visiting guest.

But the voices in his head did not allow him to be at peace which is why he had to assure himself that it was not his sense of fear that stopped him from taking an action. Yet, another reiterated description of the snake, shows how the mind of the narrator is absolutely captivated by the image of the snake. The narrator then observes how the snake took a momentary glance at the surrounding area and turned its length slowly, towards the direction of the mud wall. But just as it entered the hole, the narrator felt a strong urge of protesting against the snake’s ungrateful departure. The fact that the snake withdrew to its retreat and turned its back on him, made the narrator angry, thus leading him to pick up a piece of log and hurl it towards the water-trough in a bid to scare the snake and make it realise what it had done. The snake swiftly made its way and disappeared into the mouth of the crack in the wall. Strangely enough, even the sight of the snake in fear of its life continued to fascinate the narrator on that hot summer noon. But his feelings were not without a sense of regret.

The narrator suddenly realised that his actions were uncalled for and indeed much cruel and inhumane on his part. This made him dislike not just his own actions but the modes of education that had moulded his thoughts and behaviour. His actions reminded him of an albatross, probably referring to the bird in S.T. Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* where the Mariner shoots and kills an innocent albatross intentionally. In the poem, the curse on the guilty Mariner was lifted only when he had truly begun to appreciate the beauty of the coiling snakes that swum in the sea. Thus, the narrator is left with the feeling of guilt and regret, missing the presence of the snake and wondering how he could have taken the opportunity of presenting himself more kindly and hospitably to the splendid being that was forced into exile. And comparing the snake to a Lord of Life, the narrator feels that he certainly had to make amends for his improper thoughts and actions.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4. Why is the narrator taken by surprise?

Q5. What is the present context of the poem?

Q6. Briefly describe the conflict of both fear yet fascination in the mind of the narrator.

6.5 MAJOR THEMES

Image of the Snake

The central image in the poem is that of a snake which is gentle and means no harm to the narrator. In fact, it continues its normal activity of drinking from the water trough even as it realises that the narrator is present. Initially it does not sense any danger that it may have to confront but in a few minutes, it turns out that the narrator becomes the potential danger and almost a threat to its life. The snake in the poem is almost like a gentleman who "softly" and "silently" drinks its fill without disturbing anyone or causing any trouble. Although golden snakes in Sicily are considered venomous, this earth-brown snake crawls away in fear even when it is provoked.

The snake has a silent presence in the poem until it is compelled to hurriedly to its own safety. Moreover, it appears to be jolted from its dream-like state to its sense of reality. The snake's sleeping instinct is awakened the moment the narrator hurls an attack. But, the most important point is that the snake is innocent and means no harm even when it faces trouble. Snakes are widely seen as a creepy and unpredictable being but the truth is they are more shy and defensive by nature. While many people regard snakes as unwanted creatures there are many cultures across the world that worship snakes, for an instance in Indian culture snakes are worshipped on auspicious occasions such as *nag panchami* or *shivratri*. The poet too compares the snake to a "god" and to a "king in exile" or a "king of the underworld" that maintains its sense of composure and gravity even in the face of danger.

Man and Education

When the narrator first notices the snake, he feels a sense of honour and amazement to unexpectedly find the visiting guest. Thus, the initial response of the narrator is that of a hospitality but it is his "voice of education" that comes in the way and causes him to switch his thoughts and actions. The rational or practical voice in his head led him to consider killing the snake as golden snakes were considered venomous. Moreover, his sense of ego challenged him to finish off the snake all at once without being so emotional. But, the truth was that the narrator liked the snake in its grace and innocence. Thus, he questions himself on whether it was cowardice that gave him a sense of fear, and whether it was his perversity to talk to the snake up-close or humility to have changed his thoughts of killing it for once and for all. Yet the voices in his head did not stop telling him that : *If you were not afraid, you would kill him!*

We are trained or educated to be practical in all situations right from our school days. And when the mind is moulded in a particular way, it is difficult to unlearn all that has been coded in our thought processes. The poet talks of a similar situation that flashes before him in just a matter of a few seconds. Also, the narrator finds that it is difficult to justify one's actions and sometimes we simply end up doing things that reflect how our brains

are wired in a unique way. Here, in the poem we literally find the confused state of the narrator's mind. The moment the snake withdraws from the spot, the "honour" of the poet is suddenly transformed into "horror" and he turns unexpectedly angry seeing the snake turn its back on the host. Even after having regretted his own actions for almost hurting the snake, he watches the snake in "fascination" as though it were some kind of experiment. Then again, it is the voice of reason that makes him realise that his actions were "petty" and "vulgar" that he had to expiate for.

6.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

The first image that strikes the reader is that of a snake at a water-trough on a hot day. Throughout the poem, the charm of the snake fascinates the mind of the narrator who almost readily personifies the snake and refers to the snake as "he". For an instance, "he was at the trough before me", "he reached down from a fissure", "he sipped with his straight mouth" "someone was before me" etc. The learner may take note of the narrator's self assertion with the use of his "I", "my" for an instance, "And I. like a second-comer waiting", "my water-trough", "my wall-face", "my snake" to cite a few more examples. The poem contains seventy four lines written in free verse with the use of repetition, similes, metaphors and onomatopoeia.

You may note, that the narrator emphasises his description of the snake's presence together with his own response through the use of repetitive phrases such as "hot, hot day", "And must wait, must stand and wait", "And trailed…. And rested….And where the water…." "Earth-brown, earth-golden", "For in Sicily, the black black snakes", "Was it cowardice….Was it perversity….Was it humility…", "I felt so honoured, I felt so honoured" or "And slowly, very slowly." Some of the onomatopoeic sounds in the poem which add a dash of life and movement in the poem are words like "strange scented shade", "slackness soft-bellied", "mused a moment", "burning bowels", "peaceful, pacified", "lick his lips" and "uncrowned in the underworld".

Through the use of similes, the thirsty snake is compared to "drinking cattle", the satiated snake to that of "one who has drunken", the scared snake to "lightening", the grandeur of the snake to that of a "king in exile", as well as,

to that of "God." Some of the metaphors used in the poems are "one of the Lords of Life", "the voice of my education", "the dark door of the secret earth" or "guest in quiet." Altogether, the powerful presence of the snake and the muddled thoughts of the narrator are well represented in the words and images of the poem. The snake in its measure of soft, silent and "snake-easing" movements literally stirs the reader's imagination through the description of the narrator who tries to capture this moment of one particular day.



6.7 LET US SUM UP

After having gone through the unit, you will be able to discuss both the life and works of D.H. Lawrence, apart from exploring one of his widely anthologised poems "Snake". A thorough reading of the textual explanation, the major themes and style and language will enable the learner to appreciate the core message that the poem conveys.



6.8 FURTHER READING

1) https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/d-h-lawrence.



6.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Dereck Herbert Richards Lawrence (1885-1930) was born to Arthur John Lawrence and Lydia Beardsall in a humble working class family. He was brought up in the mining town of Eastwood, Nottinghamshire where his father had served as a coal miner.

Ans to Q No 2: Some of the best works of fiction by Lawrence are *The White Peacock*, *The Trespasser*, *Sons and Lovers*, *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love*, *The Lost Girl*, *Aaron's Rod*, *Kangaroo*, *The Boy in the Bush*, *The Plumed Serpent*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *The Escaped Cock*. The anthologies of poetry are titled *Love Poems and Others*, *Amores*, *Look!*

We Have Come Through!, *New Poems*, *Bay: A Book of Poems*, *Tortoises*, *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, *Pansies* and *Nettles*.

Ans to Q No 3: A few of the widely read short stories of Lawrence are: "The Captain's Doll", "The Fox", "The Ladybird" and "Odour of Chrysanthemums" to name a few.

Ans to Q No 4: The narrator is taken by surprise at the unexpected sight and stands at a safe distance waiting and watching the snake under the shade of a "strange-scented" carob tree.

Ans to Q No 5: The present context of the poem is in a place known as Sicily, in Italy

Ans to Q No 6: The voices in his head did not allow him to be at peace which is why he had to assure himself that it was not his sense of fear that had stopped him from taking an action. Yet, another reiterated description of the snake, shows how the mind of the narrator was absolutely captivated by the image of the snake.



6.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q.1. Discuss the life and works of the poet D.H. Lawrence.

Q.2. Give a detailed explanation of the poem "Snake" by D.H. Lawrence.

Q.3. Discuss the major themes that emerge from the poem "Snake"

Q.4. Explain the style and language in the poem.

Q.5. Explain with reference to context:

a) "And depart peaceful, pacified, and thankless,
Into the burning bowels of this earth?
Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him?
Was it perversity, that I longed to talk to him?
Was it humility, to feel so honoured?"

b) "And I wished he would come back, my snake.
For he seemed to me again like a king,
Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld,
Now due to be crowned again.
And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords

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