

Students were asked to write an essay of 4-6 pages that looks closely at one of several assigned poems by D. H. Lawrence. Students were told to focus on what seems most worthy of analysis.

SNAKE

D. H. Lawrence

A snake came to my water-trough
On a hot, hot day, and I in my pyjamas for the heat,
To drink there.

In the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob-tree
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 head on 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 there 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 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 that 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 the 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.

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 human education.

And I thought of the albatross,
And 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 [Sicily]

ESSAY 1 DRAFT

Chris

The Artistic Components of "Snake"

[1] Some of the greatest poetry of all time has resulted from confrontations between man and nature, and D.H. Lawrence's poem "Snake" is no exception. While he was in Taormina, Sicily, Lawrence had a confrontation with a poisonous snake. He felt regretful about the outcome of the confrontation and as a result wrote his famous poem about it. It is the skillful interplay of three factors in particular--mood, symbolism, and allusion--that makes this such an effective piece.

[2] One thing that makes "Snake" especially vivid is the dominant mood of drowsiness. It is a hot and drowsy day, hot enough that a snake will risk appearing at a human house and so hot that the smells of the carob tree are in the air. The snake appears and moves very slowly. The long lines of Lawrence's poem help create this slow movement, and so do the many repeated words. There are also many prepositions in Lawrence's description, and these make the reader's mind move along with the snake. The snake is described as dreaming and vague--like cattle [[strange comparison]] and as musing--a very slow action). When the snake goes back after drinking: it moves "slowly, very slowly" and is again dreaming "thrice adream" [[at three removes from being awake?]].

[3] This vivid but drowsy mood is broken several times by a different mood. In between the snake's coming and going, the poem becomes anxious and questioning. It is no longer hypnotic at all but broken and abrupt, like a debate. The lines become shorter when Lawrence talks about the pressure exerted by the voices of his education and the fact that he actually liked the snake. "If you were a man / You would take a stick and break him now, and finish / him off." Lawrence's writing in these moods is much less descriptive and memorable than the drowsy state, perhaps because he does not like the state as much. Perhaps this is why Lawrence throws the stick when the snake is already going away. Although the animal is no longer a danger to him, it is also no longer hypnotizing him with its eyes and so the spell is broken.

[4] Symbolism also plays a role in the poem's effect. One kind of symbolism is sexual,

as many of the words used to describe the snake's exit are Freudian double entendres, such as "dreadful hole," "snake-easing," entered farther, "slowly drawing himself." Besides psychological, there is also anthropological symbolism, as many items mentioned at the start of the poem symbolize the human achievements that led to the triumph of civilization. There is a water trough, the pyjamas that Lawrence wears, steps he walks down, the water pitcher, and the earth-wall that creates the garden by holding the earth back from the house. Additionally, there is the stick, and sticks were the first tool that humans used and perhaps their earliest weapon for conquering. These symbols seem to be in opposition to the sexual symbols.

[5] Civilization does not seem to be the most powerful of the two forces, in Lawrence's mind, which we know because of the way he uses a third element of his craft, religious allusions. In "Snake" it is a lowly, unpleasant creature, not God or man, that is described as the supreme being. The snake comes like a guest and seeks human hospitality, like the gods in Greek myths. [[Mt. Etna also appears in mythology.]] Lawrence says he is "honoured" to be in the presence of the snake, as if the snake were a god. He also says that the snake looked around "like a god" and that he is one of the lords of life; and he is going to be "crowned." [[How and why?]] Also Lawrence says that he has something to expiate, and "expiate" is a religious word. Ironically, the snake is not associated with heaven and light but with dark and earth.

[6] In conclusion, although Lawrence's poem is somewhat puzzling in places, especially in the reasons for what the narrator does, the elements of mood, symbolism, and allusion tie it together into a unified and vivid composition that features a major irony.

Imagined objections to my argument so far / remaining questions (besides those in brackets): Why does Lawrence feel so bad at the end? If the voices of his culture made him throw the stick, it is not really his fault. This can't be what Lawrence is saying. On the other hand, he also says that he threw the stick as a protest against the snake going. ??? Is he confused or am I? The objection might be that the poem is not really unified after all.

Why is the snake's hole "horrid?" Such a strong word. Why the change of tone?

He says that he missed a "chance" with one of the lords of life? Chance for what?

ESSAY 1 REVISION

Chris

Missing his Chance: The Real Story in D.H. Lawrence's "Snake"

[1] While he was living in Taormina, Sicily, D. H. Lawrence had a confrontation with a poisonous snake and wrote his famous poem about it. When the golden snake emerges to get a drink of water at the fountain, on a burning hot day, Lawrence at first watches it with fascination and feels honored, but eventually he hears the "the voices of my education" and throws a log at it--a petty act he regrets at the end of the poem: "I missed my chance with one of the lords of life." In this summary, the poem tells a story familiar to readers in our age of environmentalism and bio-diversity. It tells how humanity's relationship with nature is governed by our desire for power and control, which has led us to exterminate or drive away animals that threaten our progress or convenience, rather than appreciate our rare chances to observe them. But although there are indeed elements of such a criticism of humans in the poem, to take it as Lawrence's message is to miss the stress he places on the otherness of the snake and on the inner weakness of himself.¹

[2] Admittedly, the lines that appear to be the moral of Lawrence's story, in which he condemns "the voices of my accursed human education," seem to suggest a criticism of humanity and an education system that teaches how to master nature. The theme of man mastering nature is implied in opening scene when Lawrence mentions a water trough, pyjamas, steps, and a pitchers, and it is also implied in the use of a log as a weapon to kill snakes. Moreover, references to human pride in dealing with animals also appear. At the start, Lawrence expresses surprise that he, a man, "must wait, must stand and wait" while a snake drinks before him: "Someone was before me at my water trough,/ And I, like a second comer, waiting."² In "second comer" Lawrence may be ironically referring to the fact that snakes were in fact on earth before people, so people are really the second comers. At the end of the poem, Lawrence refers to a well-known story of human pride over nature. When he is regretting his action, he says "I thought of the albatross"--referring to the bird that the sailor shoots with a crossbow

in Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner." In Coleridge's poem, the sailor is cursed for killing the innocent bird and undergoes torments until a moment when he looks at sea snakes and instinctively realizes that they and all God's creatures are beautiful: "O happy living things! No tongue their beauty might declare:/ A spring of love gushed from my heart/ And I blessed them unaware." Although Lawrence would not use the Christian words that Coleridge does—such as "the dear God who loveth us/ He made and loveth all"³--he too could be saying that even though we humans have knowledge and tools that make us seem like the master species, we are really one with the animals, even dangerous ones like the snake, because we are also creatures who share the earth.

[3] The flaw in this interpretation is that it leaves out important aspects of the poem. There are aspects that deny the idea that we are one with creatures like the snake and share its world, and they also deny the environmentalist's idea that humanity's main problem is its power and mastery over nature. In fact in "Snake" Lawrence seems to be saying almost the opposite.

[4] The way the snake is presented stresses how strange and different it is. At first, Lawrence portrays the movement of the snake realistically:

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.

The movement of a snake is portrayed well in "he reached down" and in the long poetic lines, which are extended by descriptive phrases and prepositional phrases: he trailed "over" and rested "upon." The snake drinking through his "straight mouth" is also very vivid. But the later description stresses the strangeness of the snake, and the fact that he comes from another world than the man-made one. As the snake "flickered his two forked tongue from his lips, and mused a moment," Lawrence observes that this creature who emerges from a fissure is "earth-brown, earth golden from the burning bowels of the earth/ On the day of Sicilian July, with Etna smoking." This description suggests a mysterious other world, perhaps the underworld of the gods. The idea of a

boundary between worlds occurs throughout the poem: the fissure in the earth wall, the dark door of the secret earth," the smoking volcano (an outlet of the underworld), and the "horrid black hole." The mood of mystery is continued in further description of the snake:

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.

The fact that the snake does not see with eyes but by flickering his tongue, and the strange phrase "thrice adream," suggest the idea of a consciousness that is not human or rational and that the narrator perceives as alien--just as "a god" would be an alien visitor, not a creature like us.

[5] Lawrence is fascinated by this other-worldly creature. His descriptions suggest that he is almost in a trance or state of hypnosis. He calls it a state of "fascination," word that originally referred to magic spells and charms. His mood is broken when the voice of his education reminds him that golden snakes are poison and "If you were a man/ You would take a stick and break him now." Now an inner debate takes place, in which Lawrence questions what he feels. The lines are no longer long and slow-moving, but broken and choppy: "Was it cowardice... Was it perversity... Was it humility . . . And yet those voices:/ If you were not afraid, you would kill him." Lawrence admits that he is afraid, but repeats it in a way that suggests that he feels not just fear of poison but also religious awe: "And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid." Here the snake does not seem like one of God's creatures but like a disguised visiting god from a classical myth: "That he should seek my hospitality/ From out the dark door of the secret earth."

[6] The climactic stanza of the poem, leading up to when Lawrence throws the log, must be read carefully. It does not show that the voices of education telling Lawrence to kill the snake win the debate and cause the attack that drives the snake away. The

snake is already leaving before he throws the log, and Lawrence says that he threw the log because the snake was leaving:

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.

Lawrence presents himself as being suddenly disgusted. The tone is of repulsion and horror, at the "horrid black hole." The words "now his back was turned" do not refer primarily to the cowardice of the upcoming act (although it is certainly a cowardly one); instead they refer the fact that the hypnotic spell has been broken, so that Lawrence suddenly sees the slimy snake and the hot, completely dark world it is going into from the conventional human viewpoint of reason. This viewpoint cannot understand the instinctual behavior of "deliberately going into the blackness," and is in fact disgusted by this behavior.⁴ This is when Lawrence throws the log.

[7] The disgust that comes over him does not last long. He immediately feels sorry for his act and makes the statement that "I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education." If we take this on the surface, it is a statement of cultural conditioning and makes the poem end by basically saying "society is to blame"—a very weak conclusion. However, the action of the poem shows something different. It shows that Lawrence throws the log because of the disgust he temporarily feels. He throws it clumsily and half-heartedly. His gesture is weak, too-late, and confused. Even as he watches the log he has thrown he is mixed-up and stares at the snake's hole "with fascination." Lawrence's action appears ugly compared to the other action in the poem, the snake's movements, which are slow, easy, and "deliberate." These qualities come from instinct; the snake is not bothered by conflicting thoughts and voices. This is ultimately what the snake's strangeness and otherness is: he is a creature of pure instinct and no reason. Humans, because they have rational minds, cannot know of this kind of purity, although they can approach it in moments of being spell-bound, such as Lawrence was before the voices distracted him.

[8] It might be asked why Lawrence does not make this theme clearer. If his theme

is not the environmentalist one of human cruelty to God's creatures, why does he focus on the accursed voices of human education? Why (as mentioned earlier) does he refer to Coleridge's albatross? One possibility is that "Snake" is a case in which the message the author sees in his story does not quite match the story, or the story illustrates more than the author planned. But actually it is not so difficult to match Lawrence's story and message. Although Coleridge's story does express the theme that we are all God's creatures, the allusion to it could refer only to the fact that killing the albatross was a pointless act that the sailor suffered for afterwards. Similarly, the voices of Lawrence's education can indeed be seen as the right focus of the poem, if we understand what he really despises. He despises not what the voices specifically say (as in the environmental reading) but the fact that voices are in his head at all, making it hard for him to be open to life around him and to have deep and intense reactions. This is how he "missed his chance." It was not just a chance to be nice to an animal but to experience life deeply and purely, without distracting ideas. This is a problem that afflicts everyone and is the real statement that "Snake" makes about humanity.

NOTES

1. I wish to thank Jasmine Thompson for arguing with me and showing me what I really thought about the poem. Thanks also for the thoughts and contextual item about otherness provided by Dr. Gordon Harvey.
2. All quotations from Lawrence are from The Collected Poems of D.H Lawrence, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts (Viking: New York, 1980).
3. The Norton Anthology of Poetry, ed. Eastman et al. (New York: Norton, 1971), pp. 603 and 619, ll. 282-4 and 617-8.
4. A Freudian reader might uncover sexual symbolism in the references to the dreadful hole that he slowly eases himself into, and later the "earth-lipped" fissure, and suggest that these lines show disgust with the idea of sex. Perhaps Lawrence is saying that his sense of disgust at the snake has the same source as sexual disgust.

