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D.H. Lawrence as Snake Charmer

Ashley Locke

On the morning of October 12, 1917, two plain-clothes detectives, the local police sergeant, and an officer arrived with a search-warrant at the home of D.H. Lawrence and his wife Frieda in Cornwall, England. Without any charges or explanations, the Lawrences were told that they were to pack up their belongings and leave Cornwall within the next three days. In the paranoid atmosphere of WWI, the Lawrences had long been under suspicion of espionage due to Frieda Lawrence's German heritage. The accusations were, of course, unfounded. "We are innocent even of pacifist activities, let alone spying in any sort, as the rabbits of the field outside," D.H. Lawrence wrote to his friend, Lady Cynthia Asquith that afternoon. "They have taken away some of my papers – I don't know what. It is all very sickening, and makes me very weary" (Boulton 156). The expulsion from their home was the beginning of over a decade of traveling and temporary residences throughout Europe for the Lawrences. However, for D.H. Lawrence, these rootless years would fuel a new chapter in his philosophical thoughts and writing. His philosophies on nature and on man's external and internal balance within nature gained new ground during this time, especially when he and Frieda took up residence in Sicily. This new philosophical outlook would later manifest itself in one of his finest poems, "Snake," from *Birds, Beasts, and Flowers*.

"Living in Sicily after the war years was like coming to life again," Frieda wrote in *Not I, But the Wind* (Gilbert 121). The Lawrences spent some of their fondest years at Fontana Vecchia, their home

in Taormina, Sicily from March 1920 to February 1922. Living in the shadow of the “smoking Etna” (“Snake” l. 27), Lawrence began to absorb the natural beauty around him and to turn his thoughts from frustration with a warring humanity, to a contemplation of nature. He became fascinated with the creative-destructive duality of nature, and began to consider this in the human psyche. If Nature was able to maintain a certain balance and harmony between creation and destruction, why couldn’t human beings? Lawrence began to formulate his own philosophy of a balanced soul, different from that of Plato. He felt that one must acknowledge as important both the good and the uglier sides of the natural world and of the soul in order to lead a balanced life. By allowing all parts of nature and of the self to have their own significance, one could find an external and internal harmony consistent with human imperfections (Carswell 120).

Such ideas reflect his earlier philosophical essays, *The Reality of Peace*, and *The Individual Consciousness vs. the Social Consciousness*. Written three years prior to “Snake,” *The Reality of Peace* is almost prophetic of the later poem in its discussion of the serpent of “secret and shameful desire” (Lawrence, 677). In a lengthy passage, Lawrence uses the serpent as a metaphor for the less desirable parts of human nature. “We are devils and angels both,” he writes, “I must make peace with the serpent . . . within me” (677-78). He recognizes the serpent as a creature with a “raison d’etre,” and a “beauty and reality of its own” (677). Lawrence calls on the snake to “drink its own draught of life,” a striking parallel to the opening of his poem “Snake.” Lawrence will “keep the balance of creation” within himself by seeing

the serpent as a righteous being and reconciling himself with this aspect of his soul (679).

Lawrence strives for this “me and you, me and it” mentality, rather than a “me or you, me or it” mentality, in his essay *The Individual Consciousness vs. the Social Consciousness*. For Lawrence, the individual consciousness is that aspect of ourselves which is unaware of differences, or an isolation from one another or from the natural world. The social consciousness is that which comes with education and an emphasis on the intellect, a cleaving of ourselves into rational and instinctive halves. The social consciousness only sees a separateness from each other and within ourselves, and is unable to bridge the two halves into a united whole (761-764). This opinion of the “human education” will later appear in “Snake.”

So how do we bridge the gap within ourselves? What is Lawrence’s recipe for reconciling ourselves with the serpent? In *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* Lawrence calls for a new awareness of the body and the unconscious. For Lawrence, the body has a natural wisdom; instincts are not something to be repressed, but rather listened to. He called the instinctual part of the self the “blood-self.” The human education is afraid of spontaneous feelings. We have been socialized to trust the intellect and not the blood-self. However, Lawrence felt that by allowing the blood-self to guide our actions we can form more profound relationships with people and with nature. We must bridge the intellect with the blood-self in order to maintain an external and internal balance.

These previous philosophies of separateness and connectedness

reach a peak for Lawrence during his stay in Sicily and culminate in his poem "Snake." "Snake" acts as a mini essay, pulling Lawrence's theories of external and internal harmony together into one hypnotic, free verse poem. Lawrence plays with the polarized relationship between the man and the visiting snake at his water trough. The speaker and the serpent alternate majesty and power. The poem begins with the speaker standing warily, dressed only in his pajamas before the calm and majestic snake. Later, the man regains his sense of power and throws a log at the snake, who wriggles in an undignified manner back into the earth. This crisscrossed dualism points to the gap between humanity and nature, something the speaker intuitively strives to bridge (Laird 135). Throughout the poem, the speaker struggles to come to terms with his horror and fascination with the snake. He is conflicted between his intellect, which fears the snake, and his blood-self, which recognizes a creature of beauty and significance. The speaker's encounter with the snake is an encounter with his natural self; it is an awakening to a new way of thinking and a new way of interacting with the world.

D.H. Lawrence's use of a serpentine form for the poem – repetition and long curving sentences – contributes to the hypnotic moment of the speaker's encounter with the snake, and it allows the reader to enter into a new "blood-self" thought process. Lawrence felt that art has the power to reclaim our essential being, and he uses the form of "Snake" to hypnotize the reader back into his or her natural balance.

"Snake" begins its hypnotic incantation through the use of repetition. By using repetition, Lawrence delves into the unconscious, emotional mind. When we relax the rational mind and allow our emotions

to take over the flow of our thought processes, the repetition of words or phrases occurs. The first layer of repetition one notices within the poem is the recurrence of particular words and phrases. The “hot, hot day” appears in the second line and soon thereafter the speaker “must wait, must stand and wait” for the reptilian visitor to finish at his trough (l. 6). The snake’s movements while drinking are described twice by the phrase “as cattle do,” and the snake is both “earth-brown” and “earth-golden” (l. 20-21, 25). The words “afraid” and “honored” are repeated (three times each), and we are fully entranced as the snake leaves the trough: “And slowly, turned his head, / And slowly, very slowly, as if thrice adream, / Proceeded to draw his slow length curving round” (l. 41-42, 45, 54-56). Other words recur throughout the poem, though not in immediate proximity. Words such as “black,” “king,” “wall,” “hole,” and “forked,” used several times, suggest an other-worldly, almost pre-Christian quality about the snake. Such words contribute to the mysterious power of the snake, and its spell over the speaker and the reader.

The repetition of sounds also aids in the hypnosis of the speaker and the reader. For instance, “s” sounds are used repeatedly to mimic the sound of the snake. This device is particularly strong in lines 13 through 17 as the speaker describes the way the snake partakes of the water: “He sipped with his straight mouth, / Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack / long body, / Silently.” Other forms of initial alliteration abound in phrases such as “strange-scented shade,” “flickered his two-forked tongue,” and “burning bowels of the earth” (l. 4, 22, 25). The snake departs “peaceful, pacified,” and lifts his head

“dreamily, as one who has drunken” (l. 37, 50). Other alliterated phrases such as “dark door” and “lords of life,” in addition to their hypnotic repetition of sound, suggest the spiritual power of this snake to which the speaker’s eyes are slowly being opened (l. 48, 84-85).

This poem pulls not only the readers’ ears into a serpentine trance, but also their eyes. As we follow the curve of the uneven line breaks, the body of the snake appears. This clever free verse form is yet another method of submitting the reader to the blood-self. On a smaller scale, the lengths of the sentences also suggest the elongated body of the snake. The author stretches his sentences by two means. He uses multiple adjectives in lines such as “deep, strange-scented shade of great dark carob-tree” and “yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down” (l. 4, 9). Many phrases such as these use hyphenation, so that even words are elongated, contributing to the length of the line. He also hooks his sentence-long stanzas together by beginning many lines with “and”: “And yet those voices,” “And truly I was afraid” (l. 43, 45). When one traces the visual curve of the poem, it seems as if the snake has literally swallowed the form.

The lengths of the lines serve not only to create the shape of the snake but also to suspend time. The time frame of the speaker’s encounter with the snake is most likely only a few moments, but it feels like ages. When under hypnosis, clock time is generally lost and one is under the power of the hypnotist. As the snake charms the man, (an interesting role reversal), he is lost to all sense of minutes or hours. The man is being taught, or tested, and it is as if time holds its breath, waiting to see what the man will do. He is receiving a blood-self education

in place of his “human education.” He is learning a lesson about the balance of nature, and about the majesty of the earth’s creatures, high and low.

Lawrence’s descriptions of the snake in royal and divine terms indicate this majesty. It is a “king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld, / Now due to be crowned again” (l.82-83). It is “one of the lords / Of life” and looks around “like a god” (l.53, 84-85). The repeated description of the snake’s forked tongue is suggestive of a devil and the mention of the “smoking Etna” conjures up images of Hell (l. 27). The snake even behaves like a god or king when he departs “peaceful, pacified, and thankless” from the water trough (l.37). Why should a god show gratitude for something that is ultimately his?

This snake king holds the speaker in its power and grants him a snake education in place of the human education that says, “he must be killed” (l. 29). Time is suspended as the speaker battles between his fear and his fascination with the snake god. Here, two philosophies are at odds. One says the snake is to be feared and must be killed, and the other says the snake is worthy of reverence and must be spared. Earlier in the poem, before the speaker is completely under the snake’s spell, he feels guilt for his fascination with the snake: “But I must confess how I liked him” (l. 34). He lists various sins he is committing by not killing the snake as the human philosophy urges him to do. He asks, “Was it cowardice, was it perversity, was it humility” to feel honored by the snake’s presence? (l. 39-41). Will he choose the human, socialized lesson that condemns the snake as an evil and lowly creature, or will he allow the snake its “raison d’etre?”

In the end his fear wins out -- the spell is broken and he throws a log at the snake. However, the snake's lesson was not in vain. The speaker immediately regrets his action, describing it as "paltry, vulgar, a mean act" (l. 76). A new idea of sin is present here. He has, in fact, absorbed the snake lesson given him and concludes his speech with his wish to "expiate" or atone for his sin, "a pettiness" (l. 86-87). Throughout the poem the snake has been subtly compared to a devil and directly called "a god," a "lord of life," a "king of the underworld" (l. 53, 84-85). The speaker has dishonored and insulted this god and king of the natural world, and, by saying "expiate," the speaker treats the poem as a confession. Looking back at the poem, one notices the use of the past tense until the very last lines, "and I have something to expiate; / A pettiness" (l. 86-87). The poem has therefore been a confession in which a past wrong was told and a sin admitted. By confessing this wrong, the speaker atones for his pettiness. This higher state of awareness, this new sense of the natural balance, was obtained through the snake's hypnotism of the speaker, and the reader shares in it thanks to the subconscious effects of repetition and serpentine form.

The speaker in D.H. Lawrence's "Snake" may have failed his test with the serpent, choosing the socialized, "petty" response to the snake, but both he and the reader are now aware of the powers of the intuitional self and the importance of treating all of nature and all of the self with respect. "Snake" may very well have been a self-dramatization for Lawrence (Cavitch 106). During the years this poem was written he was constantly traveling and searching for a new identity, one different from that taken from him with his expulsion from

Cornwall. He was on a quest for spontaneous experience, for a submission to the blood-self and a new way of life. Thanks to the philosophical message of “Snake,” D.H. Lawrence’s readers were well on their way to a post-war effort to reconnect with the world and with the self. The message is clear: we must strive for a reconciliation with our “creative-destructive” selves, for, as D.H. Lawrence wrote in his prose introduction to the “Reptile” section of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, “in the tension of opposites all things have their being” (Lawrence 348).

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