

SNAKE

D. H. Lawrence

DAVID HERBERT LAWRENCE (1885-1930), poet, novelist, short story writer and essayist, grew up amid the strife between his genteel and educated mother and his coarse miner father. As a youth in the Nottinghamshire mining village of Eastwood, Lawrence resented the rough ways of his drunken father and adopted his mother's refined values as his own. However, as he grew in maturity as a writer, he rejected the gentility his mother represented and began to see his father earthiness as a virtue. He wrote of primitive and natural passions, trying to show instinctive forces in man that might bring happiness. In his writings he emerged as the champion of instinct. His important works include *A Collection of Poems* (1909), *The White Peacock* (1911), *The Trespasser* (1912), *Sons and Lovers* (1913), *The Rainbow* (1915), *Plumed Serpent* (1926), *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1926). In the present poem 'Snake', Lawrence exalts the values of primitive life and denounces the shams and artificialities of modern civilized life.



A. Work in small groups and discuss the following:

1. When and where did you see a snake last time?
2. Why do we find a snake both attractive and frightful?
3. Are we justified in killing animals or insects or causing harm to them simply because we consider them to be dangerous?

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 **carobtree**
I came down the steps with my pitcher 5
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, 10
He **sipped** with his straight mouth,
Softly drank though his straight gums, into his slack long body,
Silently.

Someone was before me at my water-trough,
And I, like a second comer, waiting. 15

B.1. 1. Read the following sentences and write 'T' for true and 'F' for false statements:

- It was a hot day when the thirsty snake came to drink water.
- The speaker was in a haste to drink water.
- The colour of the snake was yellow-black.
- The speaker considered himself a second comer to the trough.

B.1. 2. Answer the following questions briefly:

- Where did the speaker meet the snake?
- Why had it come out of its hole near the trough?
- Why did the speaker decide to wait?

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 20
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. 25

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? 30

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! 35

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. 40

B.2. 1. Read the following sentences and write 'T' for true and 'F' for false statements:

- a) The snake looked at the speaker vaguely.
- b) The day mentioned in the poem is that of June.
- c) There was a superstitious belief in Sicily to kill black snake.
- d) The speaker was glad playing host to a snake.
- e) The snake departed in an obliged way.
- f) The speaker had a desire to talk to the snake.

B.2. 2. Answer the following questions briefly:

- 1) How did the snake drink water?
- 2) What is the meaning of 'Sicilian July, with Etna smoking'?
- 3) What is the belief prevailing in Sicily about a snake?
- 4) Why did the speaker like the snake?
- 5) Do you think he had a conflict in mind?

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.

45

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.

50

I looked round, I put down my pitcher,
 I picked up a **clumsy** log
 And threw it at the water trough with a **clatter**.

55

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**.

60

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.

65

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.

70



And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords
Of life.

And I have something to **expiate**:
A **pettiness**.

B.2. 1. Read the following sentences and write 'T' for true and 'F' for false statements:

- a) The speaker found the slow movement of the snake quite impressive.
- b) The speaker did not like the snake going back to the dark hole.
- c) He threw the pitcher at the snake.
- d) He later regretted for having hit it.
- e) He compares it to a sea-bird, albatross.
- f) The snake appeared like king in exile.

B.2. 2. Answer the following questions briefly:

- 1) What thing about the snake did appeal him most?
- 2) Why did he not like it going back to the dark hole?
- 3) What was his reaction after hitting the snake?
- 4) Why did the speaker consider it 'a king in exile'?

GLOSSARY AND NOTES

water-through (n): a container for animals to eat and drink from

carobtree (n): a southern European tree with dark brown fruit

fissure (n): a long deep crack, gap

gloom(n): feeling of being sad and without hope

trailed (v): pulled behind

vaguely (adv): not clearly

flickered (v): kept going on and off as it shone

mused (v): thought

Sicilian July ... Etna smoking : extreme heat like the one caused when Etna erupted

venomous (adj): poisonous, full of venom

bowels(n): the tube in the stomach along which the food passes

cowardice (n): lack of courage

perversity (n): wrong or immoral thinking

longed(v): wanted eagerly

humility (n): the quality of being humble

hospitality (n): receiving with warmth

horrid (adj): horrible

clumsy log (n.phr): awkward/ not proper piece of wood

clatter (n): a loud noise

convulsed (v): caused a sudden shaking movement

writhed (v): twisted or moved body out of pain

fascination (n): strong attraction

paltry (ad): meagre, two small

vulgar (adj): not decent

despised (v): hated strongly

accursed (adj): having a curse, a bad magic spell

albatross (n): a large white sea-bird, it is sportingly killed in Coleridge's the **Ancient Mariner** resulting in psychological and spiritual crisis

expiate (v): to accept punishment for sin

pettiness (n): small and unimportant

C. 1. LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS

1. The speaker was fascinated by the snake. Do you think the time mentioned and the place it belonged to has anything to do with this fascination?
2. What does he mean by 'the voice of my education'?
3. There was a conflict in the mind of the poet. How did he analyse this conflict?
4. In what roles did he find the snake and himself? Describe.
5. The snake seemed like 'a king in exile'. What are the qualities that make the snake so majestic?
6. What makes you think that hitting the snake was quite against the sensibility of the speaker?
7. What is the 'sin' committed by the speaker that he wanted to 'expiate'?

C. 2. GROUP DISCUSSION

Discuss the following in **groups** or **pairs**:

1. Negative impact of customs and belief on our way of thinking
2. Animals and birds, too, have a right to live

C. 3. COMPOSITION

Write a short essay in about 150 words on the following:

- a. Human greed and environmental degradation
- b. Religion teaches tolerance and humility

D. WORD STUDY

D.1. Dictionary Use

Ex. 1. Correct the spelling of the following words:

fishure	streight	flikered	muzed	parvarcity
deliberately	convalsed	wreethed	fassionation	uncrowned

D.2. Word-formation

Read the following lines from the poem carefully:

*But suddenly that part of him that was left behind convulsed in **undignified** haste
Like a king in exile, **uncrowned** in the underworld,*

In the above lines '**undignified**' and '**uncrowned**' have prefix 'un-' which make them 'negative' in meaning.

Add prefixes 'un-', 'in-', 'im-', 'il-', 'ir-', 'dis-' to the following words and fill in the blanks to complete the sentences given below:

logical	responsible	respect
mortal	known	ability

- i. Pragya could not get good marks in 'writing test' because of her _____ to write fast.
- ii. Man becomes _____ because of his action.
- iii. His _____ behaviour is not liked by us.
- iv. You cannot win the case by your _____ arguments.
- v. There are still many _____ planets and stars in the universe.
- vi. His blunt refusal to come was a sign of _____.

D.3. Word-meaning

Ex 1. Read the poem carefully to find out where the following phrases have been used.

Looked at	looked around	drew up
put down	left behind	thought of

Fill in the blanks with appropriate phrases listed above:

- i. Varsha _____ her papers on the table and went out.
- ii. We could not _____ a better plan.
- iii. He ran slowly and soon was _____ all other runners.

- iv. We _____ the paintings in admiration.
 v. The acrobat _____ himself before jumping over the rope.
 vi. The thirsty man _____ in search of water.

E. GRAMMAR

Ex. 1. Go through the poem carefully and underline the lines where the following words/nouns have been used:

slackness clearness cowardice perversity
 hospitality blackness pettiness humility

Change the above words into adjectives and use them in the following sentences:

- i. Mr John has very ideas on the success of democracy in India.
- ii. men die several times.
- iii. Films should not glorify sex- behaviours.
- iv. The sky suddenly turned
- v. He often perturbs his parents with demands.
- vi. Though he occupies a high post, he is quite
- vii. His approach aggravated the problem.
- viii. Mrs Juber was quite with her guests.

F. ACTIVITIES

Ex.1. In different religions, a snake has been represented in different ways. Find out how a snake has been represented in the Hindu and Christian mythologies, and write a report on it.

Ex.2. There are over 500 varieties of snakes and not all of them are venomous. Draw a picture of a snake and label the parts of its body. Write in red ink and immediate steps to be taken after a snake bite.

Ex.3. Find out a poem in Hindi or in any language you know on snake and read that poem in the class.

