

The Snake

by D.H. Lawrence

About the author:

David Herbert Lawrence, novelist, short-story writer, poet and essayist, was born in Eastwood, Nottinghamshire, England, in 1885. Though better known as a novelist, Lawrence's first-published works (in 1909) were poems, and his poetry, especially his evocations of the natural world, have since had a significant influence on many poets on both sides of the Atlantic.

POETIC ANALYSIS

The poem is more or less like an ode, celebrating the encounter of the poet with a snake that came as a trespass into his domain for water. The poem starts by revealing the event, the time and the atmosphere. The snake in satisfying its urge for water, went to the poet's "water – trough" on "a hot day". Also, the poet who is the owner of the water - trough came for the same purpose in his pyjamas to avoid the "heat". The poet is said to be coming from his "strange – scented shade" with a "pitcher" in his hand. On getting to his water – trough, meeting the snake, he sees it as an obligation to "stand and wait" for the snake because it was there before it. The snake whose origin was from a fissure in the earth –wall, slither slowly with its "yellow – brown" "soft belly" to the "edge of the stone trough". The snake rested its "throat upon the stone bottom" and started drinking softly through its mouth into "his slack long body". The poet referred to himself as a "second comer" waiting for the snake to finish drinking. The poet while watching, observed its mode of drinking and described it as that of cattle.

The poet said in lines 15 – 19 that the snake "lifted its throat from his drinking, as cattle do, and looked at him vaguely, as drinking cattle do" All these the snake did without giving notice or concentration to whom might be watching. The poet recollected the "voice" of his education and said to him that he must kill the snake, "for in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous". This implies that the poet believes that black snakes are harmless while gold snakes are harmful, making an allusion to "Sicilian July" and "Etna smoking", which are both historical events. The echoe of his voices prompted him to kill the snake if he were really a man, but which he later refused, believing that the snake should "should seek hospitality" in him. For sparing the snake, the poet felt so honoured. The snake having considered been hospitalized, "drank enough an lifted its head" "and flickered his tongue". After reaching the peak of its satisfaction, the snake turned around slowly with its long curved body towards the direction of its origin. The snake moved in slowly into the hole without any fear. Suddenly, the poet looked around and put down his pitcher, "picked up a clumsy log and threw it at the water-trough". This was done to kill the snake but it did not. The snake hearing the "clatter" hastily moved in its remaining body "into the black hole". At the disappearance of the snake, the poet regretted his action immediately and blamed himself for acting the way he did. He placed the blame on the voice of his education to have lured him into it and feared not to pay for his negative action like

the sailor that killed “the albatross”. The poet after regretting his action; wished the snake could come back for him to crown it like a king but believed it would never do so and sees it “like a king in exile”. The poet concluded by feeling that he has to make an amendment.

The poet adopted a simple, mild, clear, colourful, descriptive and imaginative choice of words to portray his points. These make the poem to be picturesque.

STYLE / STRUCTURE

The poem is a free verse, having no specific rhyming pattern. The poem’s first part talks about the arrival of the poet and the snake with a brief description of the snake. The second division talks about the mode of the drinking of the snake and the patient attitude of the poet. Furthermore, the third segment features the poet’s mind conflict on whether to kill or spare the snake. The next segment portrays the returning of the snake and lastly, the remorse shown by the poet was expressed.

Extra Questions:

Does the atmosphere in the poem seem fraught, or relaxed? Why?

The snake is dangerous, but relaxed, so there is no real fear of danger at that moment; furthermore, temperatures are high, making the snake and onlooker slow moving and feeling lazy.

2. Why does the owner of the water trough wait until the snake has finished?

He respects the idea of first come, first served and awaits his turn.

3. With what does he compare the snake’s drinking habits?

The snake’s drinking habits remind him of cattle when they drink

4. What has been drummed into him by the society in which he lives?

All black snakes are safe and all gold snakes are dangerous and should be killed on sight.

5. Does the owner of the water trough want to kill the snake?

No, he is mesmerised by it and feels respectful towards it; in addition, he feels honoured that the snake had come to drink at his water trough.

6. Did he throw the log at the snake to hurt it?

No. He threw it at the water trough only, as a half-hearted gesture to satisfy the social guilt he felt about doing nothing about its presence. He only meant to frighten it.

7. Did he feel triumphant, or guilty?

He felt guilty. To his mind, he felt it had been a mean, vulgar and paltry act.

8. Did he respect the snake?

Yes, as he considered him to be an uncrowned king of his own (the snake’s) underground domain.

9. What was his final opinion of himself and the way he had behaved?

Petty