

Poetry UNIT 11

P.5 Snake

D. H. Lawrence

1. Snakes generate both horror and fascination. Do you agree? Why/Why not?
2. Read what W.W.E. Ross feels when he sees a snake and fill in the table given below:

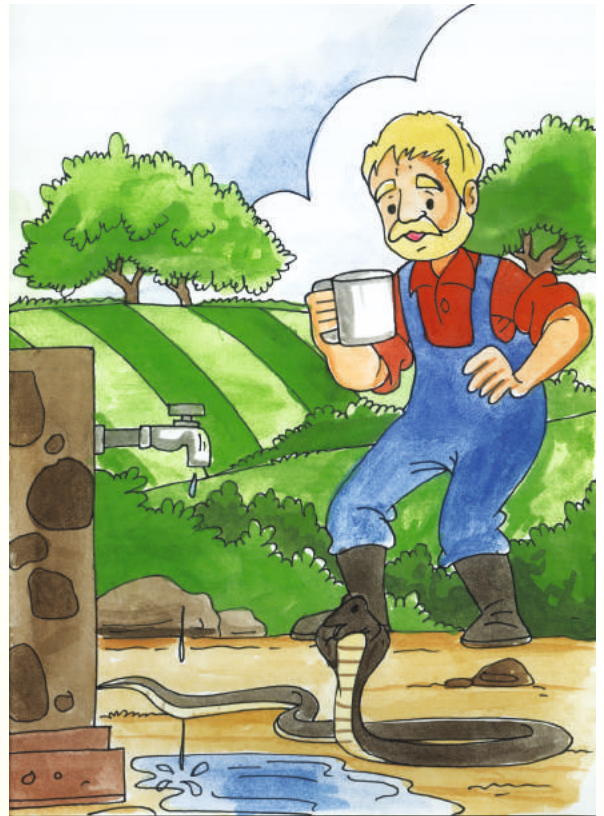
The Snake Trying

The snake trying
to escape the pursuing stick,
with sudden curvings of thin
long body. How beautiful
and graceful are his shapes!
He glides through the water away
from the stroke. O let him go
over the water
into the reeds to hide
without hurt. Small and green
he is harmless even to children.
Along the sand
he lay until observed
and chased away, and now
he vanishes in the ripples
among the green slim reeds.

What is the snake doing?	Words to describe the snake	The Poet's plea

3. Read the poem by D.H. Lawrence about his encounter with a 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**¹
- 5 I came down the steps with my **pitcher**²
 And must wait, must stand and wait, for there he was at the trough before me.
- He reached down from a **fissure**³ 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,
- 10 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.
- 15 He lifted his head from his drinking, as
 cattle do,
 And looked at me vaguely, as drinking
 cattle do,
 And **flickered**⁴ his two-forked tongue
 from his lips, and **mused**⁵ a moment,
 And stooped and drank a little more,
 Being earth-brown, earth-golden
 from the burning **bowels**⁶ 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.



1 **carob-tree** - a red flowered tree originally in the Mediterranean area.
 2 **pitcher** - tall, round container with an open top and large handle
 3 **fissure** - crack
 4 **flickered** - moved
 5 **mused** - think about
 6 **bowels** - bottom of earth

- And voices in me said, If you were a man
 25 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?
- 30 Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him? Was it **perversity**⁷, 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
- 35 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,
- 40 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
- 45 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,
- 50 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.

7 **perversity** - The quality of being unreasonable, illogical

- I think it did not hit him,
 55 But suddenly that part of him that was left behind **convulsed**⁸ in undignified haste.
Writhed⁹ 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.
 60 I thought how **paltry**¹⁰, how vulgar, what a mean act!
 I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education.
 And I thought of the **albatross**¹¹
 And I wished he would come back, my snake.
 For he seemed to me again like a king,
 65 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**¹²
 A pettiness.

About the author

D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930), English novelist, storywriter, critic, poet and painter, is one of the greatest figures in the twentieth-century English literature. The poem '**Snake**', composed in 1923, forms part of the Reptiles section of D.H. Lawrence's book '**Birds, Beasts, and Flowers**.' It details a powerful few moments when Lawrence is confronted by a snake at Lawrence's water trough, in Taormina, Sicily. The poem is unrhymed, written in free verse, and is representative of modernist literature.

4. **Given below is the summary of the poem Snake in short paragraphs. However they are jumbled. Work in pairs and put the summary into a logical sequence.**
- After drinking water to his satisfaction, the snake raised his head dreamily and flickered his forked tongue and licked his lips. The snake looked around like a God and then slowly proceeded to curve round and move away from the water trough.
 - The poet felt much like the ancient mariner who had killed the albatross for no reason. He wished that the snake would come back. He thought of the snake as a king in exile

8 **convulsed** - violent movement

9 **Writhed** - to twist and turn

10 **paltry** - worthless

11 **albatross** - an allusion to Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". He wishes for it to return.

12 **expiate** - make amends

who had to be crowned again. He also regretted having missed his opportunity of knowing and understanding one of the lords of life.

- c) As the snake put his head into the hole to retreat into the earth, the poet was filled with a protest against the idea of the snake withdrawing into his hole. The poet put down his pitcher, picked up a log and hurled it at the snake. The snake twisted violently and with great alacrity vanished into the hole in the wall.
- d) A snake visited the poet's water trough on a hot afternoon to quench his thirst. The poet who had also gone to the trough to fill water in a pitcher waited for the snake to depart since he had come at the trough prior to the poet.
- e) The voice of education inside the poet which tells him that it was the fear for the snake that made him refrain from killing him. However, the poet felt that though he was quite afraid of the snake, he did actually feel honoured that a snake had come to seek his hospitality from the deep recesses of the earth.
- f) He is guilt-ridden and feels that he has to atone for the meanness of his action of throwing a log at the snake.
- g) The snake rested his throat upon the stone bottom and sipped the water into his slack long body. After drinking water, he raised his head just like cattle do and flashed his forked tongue, thought for a moment and then bent down to drink some more water.
- h) Education and social conventions make the poet think that the golden brown poisonous snake must be killed and that as a brave man he must undertake the task of killing the snake.
- i) The poet instantly felt sorry for his unrefined and contemptible act and cursed the voices of education and civilization that had shaped his thought process and urged him to kill the snake.
- j) However, the poet instinctively likes the snake, treats him like a guest and feels honoured that it has come to drink at his water trough. The poet questions himself and wonders whether his not daring to kill the snake proves that he is a coward and whether his desire to talk to the snake reflects his perversity.

5. Based on your reading of the poem, answer the following questions by ticking the correct options:

- 1. *'he lifted his head from his drinking as cattle do'* - The poet wants to convey that the snake
 - a) is domesticated
 - b) is innocent
 - c) is as harmless as cattle

- d) drinks water just like cattle
2. *'Sicilian July', 'Etna smoking' and 'burning bowels of the earth'* are images that convey that
- a) there are snakes in volcanic areas
 - b) the poet lives in a hot area
 - c) it is a really hot day when the snake comes
 - d) Sicilian snakes are dangerous
3. *'A sort of horror, a sort of protest overcame me'* - The poet is filled with protest because
- a) he doesn't want to let the snake remain alive
 - b) he fears the snake
 - c) he doesn't want the snake to recede into darkness
 - d) he wants to kill it so that it doesn't return
4. In the line *'And as he slowly drew up, snake-easing his shoulders, and entered farther'* the phrase *snake easing* his shoulders means
- a) loosening its shoulders
 - b) slipping in with majestic grace
 - c) moving slowly
 - d) moving fast
5. *'He seemed to me like a king in exile...'* The poet refers to the snake as such to emphasize that the snake
- a) is like a king enduring banishment
 - b) is like a king due to be crowned
 - c) is a majestic king who came for a while on earth
 - d) is a majestic creature forced to go into exile by man
6. *'I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act'* - The poet is referring to
- a) the snake going into the dreadful hole
 - b) the accursed modern education
 - c) the act of throwing a log of wood at the snake
 - d) the act of killing the snake

6. Answer the following questions briefly:

- a) Why does the poet decide to stand and wait till the snake has finished drinking? What does this tell you about the poet? (Notice that he uses 'someone' instead of 'something' for the snake.)
- b) In stanza 2 and 3, the poet gives a vivid description of the snake by using suggestive expressions. What picture of the snake do you form on the basis of this description?
- c) How does the poet describe the day and the atmosphere when he had seen the snake?
- d) What does the poet want to convey by saying that the snake emerges from the 'burning bowels of the earth'?
- e) Do you think the snake was conscious of the poet's presence? How do you know?
- f) How do we know that the snake's thirst had been satiated? Pick out the expressions that convey this.
- g) The poet has a dual attitude towards the snake. Why does he experience conflicting emotions on seeing the snake?
- h) The poet is filled with horror and protest when the snake prepares to retreat and bury itself in the 'horrid black', 'dreadful' hole. In the light of this statement, bring out the irony of his act of throwing a log at the snake.
- i) The poet seems to be full of admiration and respect for the snake. He almost regards him like a majestic God. Pick out at least four expressions from the poem that reflect these emotions.
- j) What is the difference between the snake's movement at the beginning of the poem and later when the poet strikes it with a log of wood? You may use relevant vocabulary from the poem to highlight the difference.
- k) The poet experiences feelings of self-derision, guilt and regret after hitting the snake. Pick out expressions that suggest this. Why does he feel like this?
- l) You have already read Coleridge's poem The Ancient Mariner in which an albatross is killed by the mariner. Why does the poet make an allusion to the albatross?
- m) 'I have something to expiate'-Explain.

7. The encounter with the snake and the dual response of the poet to his presence at the water trough reflect a conflict between civilized social education and natural human instincts. The poet writes a diary entry highlighting how he was torn between the two voices. Write his diary.

- 8. Alliteration** is the repetition of sounds in words, usually the first sound. **Sibilance** is a special form of alliteration using the softer consonants that create hissing sounds, or sibilant sounds. These consonants and digraphs include s, sh, th, ch, z, f, x, and soft c.

Onomatopoeia is a word that imitates the sound it represents for a rhetorical or artistic effect of bringing out the full flavor of words. The sounds literally make the meaning in such words as "buzz," "crash," "whirr," "clang" "hiss," "purr," "squeak," etc. It is also used by poets to convey their subject to the reader. For example, in the last lines of Lord Alfred Tennyson's poem 'Come Down, O Maid', /m/ and /n/ sounds produce an atmosphere of murmuring insects:

*... the moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees.*

Notice how D H Lawrence uses both these devices effectively in the following stanza.

*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.*

To what effect has the poet used these devices? How has it added to your understanding of the subject of the poem? You may record your understanding of the characteristics of a snake under the following headings:

- a) Sound
 - b) Movement
 - c) Shape
9. The poet has also used both repetition and similes in the poem. For example-- 'must wait, must stand and wait' (repetition) and 'looked at me vaguely as cattle do' (simile). Pick out examples of both and make a list of them in your notebooks. Give reasons why the poet uses these literary devices.
 10. A Calligram is a poem, phrase or word in which the handwriting is arranged in a way that creates a visual image. The image created by the words expresses visually what the word or words, say. In a poem, it manifests visually the theme presented by the text of the poem. Read the poem given below. Try to compose a calligram. You could pick a subject of your choice.

Snake

Snake glides
 through grass
 over
 Pebbles
 forked tongue
 working
 never
speaking
 but its
 body
 whispers
 listen.

Keith Bosley