

A SNAKE IN THE GRASS

R.K. Narayan

RASIPURAM KRISHNASWAMI NARAYAN (1906-2001), the Sahitya Akademy Award winner in 1960, was one of the most accomplished and well-known Indian writers in English. Realism, irony and humour are the distinguished strength of his works. He paints the idiosyncrasies of people with consummate skill. His works include *The Guide* (novel), *Next Sunday* (collection of essays), and *Lawley Road* (collection of short stories). 'A Snake in the Grass', the piece taken from *An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories*, dramatically presents the alarm and disturbance caused in a household threatened by a cobra. The character of some of the people taking part in the hunt is dextrously revealed. Narayan also touches gently on the people's superstitions concerning snakes. An undercurrent of irony and humour marks many of his observations in the story.



A. Work in small groups and discuss these questions:

1. Have you ever seen a snake in your house/village?
2. What was your reaction when you saw it?
3. How did other people of your family or village react to it?
4. Did you kill the snake? Why?

A SNAKE IN THE GRASS

1. On a sunny afternoon, when the inmates of the bungalow were at their siesta a cyclist rang his bell at the gate frantically and announced: 'A big cobra has got into your compound. It crossed my wheel.' He pointed to its track under the gate, and resumed his journey.

2. The family consisting of the mother and her four sons assembled at the gate in great agitation. The old servant Dasa was sleeping in the shed. They shook him out of his sleep and announced to him the arrival of the cobra. 'There is no cobra,' he replied and tried to **dismiss** the matter. They swore at him and forced him to take an interest in the cobra. 'The thing is something here. If it is not found before the evening, we will dismiss you. Your neglect of the garden and the lawns is responsible for all these dreadful things coming in.' Some neighbours dropped in. They looked accusingly at Dasa: 'You have the laziest servant on earth,' they said. 'He ought to keep the surroundings tidy.' 'I have been asking for a grass-cutter for months,' Dasa said. In one voice they ordered him to manage with the available things and learn not to make demands. He **persisted**. They began to **speculate** how much it would cost to buy a grass-cutter. A neighbour declared that you could not think of buying any article made of iron till after *the war*. He **chanted banalities** of wartime prices. The second son of the house **asserted** that he could get anything he wanted at controlled prices. The neighbour **became eloquent on** black market. A heated debate followed. The rest watched in **apathy**. At this point the college-boy of the house **butted in** with: 'I read in an American paper that 30,000 people die of snake-bite every year.' Mother threw up her arms in horror and *arraigned* Dasa. The boy **elaborated** the statistics. 'I have worked it out, 83 a day. That means every twenty minute someone is dying of cobra-bite. As we have been talking here, one person has lost his life somewhere.' Mother nearly **screamed** on hearing it. The compound looked **sinister**. The boys brought in bamboo-sticks and pressed one into the hands of the servant also. He kept **desultorily poking** it into the **foliage with a cynical air**. 'The fellow *is* beating about the bush,' someone cried **aptly**. They tacked up their *dhoties*, seized every available knife and crow-bar and began to **hack** the garden. *Creepers*, bushes, and lawns, were laid low. What could not be trimmed was cut to the root. The inner walls of the house brightened with the unobstructed **glare** streaming

in. When there was nothing more to be done Dasa asked triumphantly, 'Where is the snake?'

B.1 Answer the following questions briefly :

1. Why did the cyclist ring the bell?
2. Why did Dasa say, 'There is no cobra'?
3. What happens when someone wakes you up and asks you to do something?
4. What fault did the people find with Dasa?
5. Do you find fault with the person who refuses to do what you want him to do?
6. What was Dasa's defence?
7. What does 'with cynical air' mean?
8. Why did the college-boy quote statistics?
9. What made the mother nearly scream?

3. An old beggar cried for alms at the gate. They told her not to pester when they were engaged in a snake-hunt. On hearing it the old woman became happy. 'You are fortunate. It is God *Subramanya* who has come to visit you. Don't kill the snake.' Mother was in hearty agreement. 'You are right. I forgot all about the promised *Abhishekam*. This is a reminder.' She gave a coin to the beggar, who promised to send down a snake-charmer as she went.



Presently an old man appeared at the gate and announced himself as a snake-charmer. They gathered around him. He spoke to them of his life and activities and his power over snakes. They asked admiringly: 'How do you catch them?' 'Thus,' he said, **pouncing** upon a **hypothetical** snake on the ground. They pointed the direction in which the cobra had gone and asked him to go ahead. He looked helplessly about and said, 'If you show me the snake, I'll at once catch it. Otherwise what can I do? The moment you see it again, send for me. I live nearby.' He gave his name and address and departed.

4. At five in the evening, they **trew** away their **sticks** and **implements** and **repaired** to the veranda to rest. They had turned up every stone in the garden and cut down every grass-blade and shrub, so that the tiniest insect coming into the garden should have no cover. They were loudly discussing the various measures they would take to protect themselves against reptiles in the future, when Dasa appeared before them carrying a water-pot whose mouth was sealed with a slab of stone. He put the pot down and said: 'I have caught him in this. I saw him peeping out of it ... I saw him before he could see me.' He explained at length the strategy he had employed to catch and seal up the snake in the pot. They stood at a safe distance and gazed on the pot. Dasa had the glow of a champion on his face. 'Don't call me an idler hereafter,' he said. Mother **complimented** him on his sharpness and wished she had placed some milk in the pot as a sort of religious duty. Dasa picked up the pot cautiously and walked off saying that he would leave the pot with its content with the snake-charmer living nearby. He became the hero of the day. They watched him in great admiration and decided to reward him adequately.
5. It was five minutes since Dasa was gone when the youngest son cried: 'See there!' Out of a hole in the compound wall a cobra emerged. It glided along towards the gate, paused for a moment to look at the gathering in the veranda with its hood half-open. It crawled under the gate and disappeared along a drain. When they recovered from the shock they asked: 'Does it mean that there are two snakes here?' The college-boy murmured: 'I wish I had taken the risk and knocked the water-pot from Dasa's hand; we might have known what it contained.'

B.2. Answer the following questions briefly :

1. What made the old beggar happy?
2. What did the beggar woman say?
3. Why did the snake-charmer look helplessly about?
4. Why did they cut down all the plants and the grass in the garden?
5. Cite instances from the lesson which show the old mother's superstitious nature.
6. Did Dasa, in your opinion, really catch the cobra? Give reasons.
7. What impression of Dasa do you get from this episode?

GLOSSARY AND NOTES

inmates (n): persons living together

siesta (n): rest or sleep in the early afternoon

frantically (adv): with wild excitement from fear and anxiety

resumed (v): continued once more

dismiss (v): stop thinking or talking about

persisted (v): refused to change his stand

speculate (v): guess

the war (n): World war II. Iron was one of the many things that were difficult to get during wartime.

chanted (v): sang (here, spoke in a sing-song way)

banalities (of) (n): dull, commonplace remarks (about)

asserted (v): declared

became eloquent on (idiom): spoke forcefully as if making a speech

in apathy: without interest

butted in (v): forced himself into the conversation

arraigned (v): accused

elaborated (v): worked out the details of

screamed (v): gave a loud, sharp cry of fear

sinister (adj): threatening harm and evil

desultorily (adv): in a haphazard way

poking (pres.p): pushing

follage (n): leaves of the plants

with a cynical air (idiom): in a manner that showed distrust of the others' ideas

aptly (adv): fittingly

hack (v): cut roughly by blows

creepers (n): plants that grow along the ground

glare (n): bright light

pester (v): trouble

pouncing (pres. p): making a sudden attack or downward movement

hypothetical (adj): supposed, not actual

implements (n): tools

repaired (v): went

reptiles (n): cold-blooded animals that move along with body close to the ground (here, snakes)

complimented (v): praised

C. 1. LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS

1. The neighbours who assembled to hear of cobra talk about several things. Make a list of the issues they touch upon. What does the conversation suggest about the people's reaction when danger strikes?
2. How do you react when your parents chide you for neglecting your duties?

3. Read carefully the following utterances of Dasa:
 'There is no cobra.'
 'Where is the snake?'
 'I have caught him in this.'
 'Don't call me an idler hereafter.'
 What do these utterances tell about Dasa's character?
4. Does the story throw any light on how people faced with sudden danger behave?
5. Narrate in brief the people's attempt to catch the cobra.
6. Narrate in brief what the snake charmer tells about catching a snake.

C. 2. GROUP DISCUSSION

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

- a. Giving milk to snake is a religious duty. Do you agree? Give reasons in favour of your argument?
- b. For every danger or calamity we tend to find a scapegoat. Do you subscribe to this view? Give examples from the life around you.
- c. Story telling is an effective way of teaching.

C. 3. COMPOSITION

- a. Write an essay in not more than 200 words on how superstitions influence lives in our society.
- b. Write a paragraph in about 100 words on the art of snake-charming

D. WORD STUDY

D.1. Dictionary Use

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

bunglow	gret	distene	dredfull
impliment	murner	neighbour	sieze
eloquent	baggarr	dieing	

Ex.2. Look up a dictionary and write two meanings of each of the following words- the one in which it is used in the lesson and the other which is more common:

swear	chant	glare	cover
measure	repair	knock	watch

D.2. Word-formation

Look at the following examples:

The inner walls brightened with the **unobstructed** glare.

The snake **disappeared** along the drain.

You see that in the first example prefix 'un-' is added with 'obstructed' which is past participle but is used here as an adjective. In the second example, prefix 'dis-' is added to a verb. In both the cases we get the opposite meaning.

Ex.1. Use 'un-' and 'dis-' suitably before each of the following words and use them in sentences of your own. The first one is done for you.

Liked - disliked - Naghaz disliked getting up early.
obeyed
crowned
solved
believed
changed.
connected
decided.
announced.
agreed
noticed
qualified

D.3. Word-meaning

Ex. 1. Match the words given in **Column A** with their meanings given in **Column B**:

Column A

one of a number of persons living together
 rest or sleep in the early afternoon
 person who does not work
 forceful and fluent in speech
 plan and method used to achieve a goal
 bright with sunlight
 everything around and about a place
 cut roughly by blows

Column B

idler
 surroundings
 hack
 sunny
 siesta
 eloquent
 strategy
 inmate

D. 4. Phrases

Ex.1. Read the lesson carefully and find out the sentences in which the following phrases have been used. Then use them in sentences of your own:

swear at

drop in

beat about the bush

ask for

send for

butt in

E. ACTIVITY**Ex.1. Project work:**

Given below is the list of the words that suggest different forms of story. Look up a reference book or a good dictionary of literary terms to find out what they really connote and how they are different from one another. Also, cite examples for each of them:

Story

Tale

Novel

Fable

Legend

Myth

Parable

Narrative

Allegory

Anecdote

