

REPRESSED DESIRES: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL READING OF THE POEM 'SNAKE' BY D.H. LAWRENCE

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Abstract: The Psychoanalytic criticism is a form of literary criticism which uses some of the techniques of Psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature. It is a literary criticism or literary theory which in method, concept or form is influenced by the tradition of Psychoanalysis begun by Sigmund Freud. The literary work which I have chosen is the poem "Snake" by D.H. Lawrence. The serpent or snake is one of the oldest and most widespread mythological symbols. They have been associated with some of the oldest rituals known to human kind and represent dual expression of good and evil.

The frightening experience of confronting a snake is beautifully described in D.H. Lawrence's poem "Snake": D.H. Lawrence personifies a snake in the poem with certain charm. The Poem is modern and the natural undertones in the Poem fascinate the readers. It is a brilliant modernist poem in free verse. The realistic and natural undertones with the musings and reflective tone of the poem can intrigue the readers. The simple but scary encounter of seeing a snake near home is adeptly described in vivid language. The objective of this Project work is to attempt a psychoanalytical reading of the poem "Snake". This paper assumes that the psychoanalytical reading of the Poem would bring about the significance of snake symbol as indicating the repressed sexual desire in human beings. Application of this literary criticism provides more insights into the underlying aspects of the Poem. It also throws light into the unconscious aspect of the narrator in the Poem.

The 'Snake' provides ample scope for psychoanalytical reading. In Freudian psychology, snake possesses a strong connection with the human unconscious and its repressed desires. Hence, this study would bring about more aspects underlying the snake symbol.

Index words: psychoanalytical reading-D.H.Lawrence-'snake'- phallic symbol

INTRODUCTION

Psychoanalytic reading has been practised since the early development of Psychoanalysis itself and has developed into a heterogeneous interpretive tradition.

The object of Psychoanalytic literary criticism, at its very simplest can be the psychoanalysis of the author or of a particularly interesting character in a given work. Critics may view the fictional characters as a psychological case study, attempting to identify such Freudian concepts as Oedipus Complex, Penis envy, Freudian slips, Id, Ego and Superego and so on, and demonstrate how they influenced the thoughts and behaviours of fictional characters. Early psychoanalytic literary criticism would often treat the text as if it were a kind of dream. This means that the text represses its real (latent) content behind the obvious (manifest) content. The process of changing from latent to manifest content is known as the dream work, and involves operations of condensation and displacement. The critic analyses the language and symbolism of a text to reverse the process of the dream work and arrive at the underlying latent thoughts.

However, more complex variations of psychoanalytic criticism are possible. The concepts of Psychoanalysis can be deployed with reference to the narrative or poetic structure itself, without requiring access to the authorial psyche (an interpretation motivated by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's remark that "the unconscious is structured like a language"). Or the founding texts of Psychoanalysis may themselves be treated as literature, and re-read for the light cast by their formal qualities on their theoretical content. Like all forms of literary criticism, psychoanalytic criticism can yield useful clues to the sometime baffling

symbols, actions and settings in a literary work; however like all forms of literary criticism, it has its limits. For one thing, some critics rely on psychoanalytic criticism as a “one size fits all” approach, when other literary scholars argue that no one approach can adequately illuminate or interpret a complex work of art.

David Herbert Richards Lawrence (11 September 1885- 2 March 1930) was an English novelist, poet, playwright, essayist, literary critic and painter. His collected works among other things represent an extended reflection upon the dehumanising effects of modernity and industrialisation. In them, some of the issues Lawrence explores are emotional health, vitality, spontaneity and instinct.

Lawrence’s opinions earned him many enemies and he endured official persecution, censorship and misrepresentation of his creative work throughout the second half of his life, much of which he spent in a voluntary exile which he called his “savage pilgrimage”. At the time of his death, his public reputation was that of a pornographer who had wasted his considerable talents. E.M. Forster, in an obituary notice, challenged this widely held view, describing him as, “The greatest imaginative novelist of our generation”. Lawrence’s fascination with the theme of homosexuality, which is overtly manifested in *Women in Love*, could be related to his own sexual orientation. In a letter written during 1913, he writes, “I should like to know why nearly everyman that approaches greatness tends to homosexuality, whether he admits it or not”. He is also quoted saying, “I believe the nearest I have come to perfect love was with a young coal miner when I was about sixteen”.

Lawrence is perhaps best known for his novels *Sons and Lovers*, *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. His best known short stories include “The Captain’s Doll”, “The Ladybird”, “The Fox”, “Odour of Chrysanthemums”, “The Princess”, “The Rocking- Horse Winner”, “The Virgin and the Gypsy”, “The Woman who Rode Away” etc.. Among his most praised collections is “The Prussian Officer and Other Stories” published in 1914. Although, best known for his novel. Lawrence wrote almost 800 poems. His best known poems are probably those dealing with nature such as those in the collection *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, including the Tortoise poems and “Snake”.

“Snake” is a seventy-four line free verse poem divided into nineteen verse paragraphs (stanzas of unequal length). Like many modern lyrics, it incorporates a narrative element, recording the poet’s encounter with a snake at his water-trough. Through this structure and carefully mobilized imagery, the poet reveals his conflicted, deepening consciousness, which moves from casual description to epiphanic confession. Written when D.H.Lawrence and his wife Frieda were living in Taormina, Sicily, in 1920-21, the poem is derived from Lawrence’s actual experience there. Its imagery and themes, however, are anticipated in the second section of his 1917 essay “The Reality of Peace”.

The Psychoanalytical criticism is one among the important branches of literary criticism. It throws light into the human unconscious, its peculiar patterns and studies how far a person’s unconscious influences his behaviour and activity. The application of Psychoanalytical criticism in literary works brings out many interesting aspects of the text which lies hidden . It deals with motives, especially hidden or disguised motives; as such it helps clarify literature on two levels, the level of the writing itself, and the level of the character action within the text. It deals with many basic elements which we might think of as poetic or literary, including metaphor and metonymy; Freud deals with this particularly in his work on the *Interpretation of Dreams*. It opens the nature of the subject: who it is who is experiencing, what our relationships of meaning and identity are to the psychic and cultural forces which ground so much of our being. The ‘Snake’ provides ample scope for psychoanalytical reading. In Freudian psychology, snake possesses a strong connection with the human unconscious and its repressed desires. Hence, this study would bring about more aspects underlying the snake symbol.

D.H. Lawrence begins the poem by describing the scene in which he encounters the snake using simple and succinct imagery. The first few lines enable the reader to visualize the scene.

“A snake came to my water- trough

On a hot, hot day, and I in pyjamas for the heat,

To drink there.”

The beginning of the poem depicts a hot day, when the narrator had a visitor, a snake that came to his water-trough for a drink in his presence. As he came down the steps in pyjamas with a pitcher, under the carob tree spreading its shade and strange scent, he caught a glimpse of the snake and had to stand and wait.. the poet stood and watched the snake slithering down from a crack in the earthen wall and it slipped down its yellow-brown soft belly over the edge of the stone-trough. The protagonist holding a water container is shocked and stands still in the cool shade of the Mediterranean tree on seeing the snake approaching the water trough and waits. His musings and racing thoughts on encountering the snake are skilfully and lucidly expressed. The narrator alludes to personification to describe how the snake drinks the water from the tap and all throughout the poem uses elements of personification to describe his musings. He stood watching the snake sipping the water dripping from the tap with its straight mouth through its straight gums silently. The lines,

“He lifted his head from his drinking, as cattle do
And looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do”.

While he was waiting there, like a second comer, waiting for the snake to finish his drink, it lifted its head, and looked at the narrator vaguely, flickered its two-forked tongue from its lips, paused a moment and then drank a little more. Here the poet uses simile and repetitive imagery to describe what he felt after witnessing the snake drink water from the water-trough. The snake seemed harmless to the protagonist as domesticated cattle and the act of drinking water by the snake was akin to that of cattle. By all this imagery of water and animals, the poet tries to express the fact that both domesticated and wild animals and even human beings are vulnerable to the effects of nature as well as human excesses.

The following lines are rich in imagery and allusions;

“Being earth-brown, earth golden,
From the burning bowels of the earth
On the day of Sicilian July, with Etna smoking”.

Here, the poet describes the sweltering Mediterranean heat of Sicily, Italy, in July with the smoky volcano Etna further aggravating the heat. In these conditions, the earthy snake which has surfaced from the hot and disturbed underground recesses of Mother Earth is quenching its thirst.

The poet in the latter part of the poem describes the conflicting thoughts that are going on in his mind and is aware of the social conditioning and the narrow perspectives imposed by the education system of the late 1800s to early 1900son his mind. He describes the voices of knowledge that compels him to kill the snake as black snakes in Sicily are non-poisonous while the yellow snakes are venomous. The followings lines reflect the conflicting thoughts that are going on in the protagonist’s mind;

“Was it cowardice that I dared not to 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”

The protagonist had learned to detest snakes from his childhood and had heard that Sicilian snakes with golden hues were venomous. However, the protagonist was afraid of the snake, but at the same time, awe-struck that the seemingly innocent snake had made a visit. His inner voice and intuition to leave the snake alone conflicted with his earlier conditioning voices to kill the snake.

He talks about the voice in his head again, challenging him if he is a man, he would finish him off. The voices re-echoed “finish off the snake with a stick”. Later the protagonist confesses that he liked the snake and he was glad that it had visited his water-trough and that it was a silent guest for a drink. It departed peacefully but thankless, back into the earth.

The narrator debates within himself if it was his cowardice that kept him from killing it, or probably his perversity that urged him to talk to it. He ponders if it was his humility that made him feel honoured. In the following stanzas of the poem the narrator expresses emotions of fear and feelings of honour; fear that the venomous snake was dangerous to let go and feelings of honour, since the snake has sought his hospitality. Then the protagonist describes the contended snake, after his drink from his water- trough looked around, like a god not seeing and then the slow retreat of the reptile to its hole. As he stood there being honoured about the visit of a snake, and the lengthy reptile slowly disappearing a horror struck him. When the snake begins to draw back into its home, “a sort of horror, a sort of protest” forms in the poet’s mind and he lets himself be guided by the instinct. While the snake is climbing the broken bank of his wall face, he had enough time to react and to make a quick decision to kill it. Placing down the pitcher, he braced himself, picked up a clumsy log and hurled it at the water-trough with a clatter. The protagonist could no longer see the snake’s peaceful and docile face, the urge to do something overcomes him and he picks up a “clumsy log and throws it at the water-trough with a clatter”. Though the stick does not hit the snake, but being alarmed, it “convulses in undignified haste” and swiftly slithers into the security of the earth. The slow retreating body of the snake was then seen writhing and lightning, in a flash, it disappeared into the fissure, the dark hole from where it had appeared, thus leaving the narrator stare into space at his foolish act. For a moment regret engulfed him, his instant reaction and emotions reversed. He despised himself and the voices which bade him to kill the venomous reptile. Then the narrator makes an allusion to T.S. Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by referring to the snake as his own albatross. In the same way that the mariner had acted on impulse and killed the albatross, resulting in the terrible way in which the sailors had to suffer. As the narrator says he thought of the albatross, he could be talking about his emotional burden or guilt after attacking the innocent snake. He had driven away the snake. He wishes that “he would come back, my snake”, so that the narrator could atone for his evil act and regain the snake’s trust. He desires the venomous reptile to be his visitor once again. For this time, the snake seemed to him like a king, a king in exile and one who has his crown in the underworld, waiting to be crowned again. He utters his regret of missing his chance with “one of the lords of life”. The thoughts of highness and majesty about the snake, command his inner soul to make amends for his rash behaviour. So he utters regret and pardon in his last statement. He had something to expiate for his irritable action when he picked up the clumsy log to kill the snake.

Attempting a psychoanalytical reading would bring about the hidden, in-depth aspects which could be attributed to the Poem. Psychoanalytic criticism adopts the methods of “reading” employed by Freud and later theorists to interpret texts. It argues that literary texts, like dreams express the secret unconscious desires and anxieties of the author, that a literary work is a manifestation of the author’s own neuroses. One may psychoanalyse a particular character within a literary work, but it is usually assumed that all such characters are projections of the author’s psyche.

In psychoanalytic criticism, certain symbols are accorded with particular meanings which help in the interpretation of the meaning of the text. The nature of the symbol relation is a comparison, but not a desired comparison. A symbolic relationship is a comparison of a special kind, the origin of which is not yet clearly understood by us. The number of things that find symbolic representation is not great- the human body as a whole, parents, children, brothers and sisters, birth, death, nakedness and a few others. Birth is almost regularly represented by some reference to “water”; either one plunges into the water or climbs out of it, or rescues someone from the water, or is himself rescued from it, i.e. a mother-relation to the person. Death is replaced by taking a journey, riding in a train; being dead by various darksome, timid suggestions; nakedness, by clothes and uniforms.

In contrast to the paucity of this enumeration, it is a striking fact that the objects and subject matter of another sphere are represented by an extraordinarily rich symbolism. This is the sphere of the sexual life, the genitals, the sex processes and sexual intercourse. The great majority of symbols are sex symbols. There exists a number of representations for the male genital that may be called symbolic, and in which the similarity of comparison, for the most part, is very enlightening. The holy figure 3 is a symbolic substitute for the entire male genital. The more conspicuous and the more interesting part of the genital to both sexes, the male organ, has symbolic substitutes in objects of like form, those which are long and upright, such as sticks, umbrellas, poles, trees etc.. It is also symbolized by pointed weapons of every type, knives, daggers, lances, swords,

firearms, guns, pistols and revolver. To the less comprehensible male sex-symbols belong certain reptiles and fish, notably the famous symbol of the snake. The image of snake possesses a very vital role in psychoanalytic criticism. Snake is considered as a phallic symbol, as it represents the male sexual organ. "Because of some of its real or perceived characteristics extending itself, swelling and rearing up the head, penetrating into holes and crevices in the earth, secreting a fluid, evoking the tacky and clammy sensations associated with genitals- the snake has been traditionally considered the most important symbol of the male organ" (Kakar 50). In Freudian psychology, it is a symbol for repressed sexual desire or inner conflict about how one express or experience sexuality.

In the Poem, the snake that the narrator encounters could be seen, psychologically as the narrator's own sexual desires. As the speaker of the Poem is a male and symbol of the snake stands for the phallus, hence, the poem reflects on the homosexual desires of the narrator. Sigmund Freud, the greatest proponent of psychoanalytic criticism suggested a three-part model of the human psyche, dividing it into the conscious, subconscious and unconscious. The unconscious mind or the unconscious consists of the processes in the mind that occur automatically and are not available, and include thought processes, memory, affect and motivation. The concept was developed and popularized by the Austrian neurologist and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. Empirical evidence suggests that the unconscious phenomena include repressed feelings, automatic skills, subliminal perceptions, thoughts, habits and automatic reactions and possibly also complexes, hidden phobias and desires. Thus the unconscious mind can be seen as the source of dreams and automatic thoughts, the repository of forgotten memories and the locus of implicit knowledge. Freud divided the mind into the conscious mind or the ego and the unconscious mind. The latter was then further divided into the id (instincts and drive) and the super ego (or the conscience). In this theory, the unconscious refers to the mental processes of which individuals make themselves unaware. Freud proposed a vertical and hierarchical architecture of human consciousness: the conscious mind, the preconscious mind and the unconscious mind- each lying beneath the other. He believed that significant psychic events take place "below the surface" in the unconscious mind, like hidden messages from the unconscious. In psychoanalytic terms, the unconscious does not include all that is not conscious, but rather what is actively repressed from conscious thought or what a person is averse to knowing consciously. Freud viewed the unconscious as a repository for socially unacceptable ideas, wishes or desires, traumatic memories and painful emotions put out of mind by the mechanism of "psychological repression". However, the contents did not necessarily have to be negative. In the psycho analytic view, the unconscious is a force that can only be recognized by its effects- it expresses itself in the symptom. In a sense, this view places the unconscious self as an adversary to its unconscious, warring to keep the unconscious hidden.

In the Poem, in the narrator's unconscious, the homosexual desires arouse as he gives an elaborate physical description of the snake which brings to his mind, a kind of sexual excitement. It is then that the super ego interferes and tries out to free the unconscious from such intentions. Hence, the narrator was reminded of the voices of his education which taught him "to kill the snake", implying to kill such homosexual desires. In traditional societies, homosexual desires and same sex relations were considered a taboo and are totally restricted.

The super ego or the conscience even comes up with a threat that "if you were a man, you would finish him off". Here, the use of the word 'man' is to be noted. It emphasizes that being a man; a male, this particular sexual feeling towards the same-sex, should be prevented. The homosexual feelings of the narrator is brought to daylight, by his own words, "I confess how I liked him". The consciousness or the ego of the narrator debates within himself, on whether it was his cowardice that he did not dare to kill the snake or was it that he longed to talk to the snake. The narrator's consciousness doesn't want the homosexual feelings to be recognized. Moreover, he is aware of the society where he lives in.

In the stanza that follows, it is seen that the unconscious takes over the ego and hence the lines,
"I picked up the clumsy log
And threw it at the water-trough with a clatter"

implies that the ego was taken over by the unconscious symbolises sexual desire. The last stanzas portray a fierce battle between the id (or the unconscious) on one side, and the ego (or the conscious) and the super ego (or the conscience) on the other. The final victory is for the ego and the super ego, as in the Poem, it is said that the narrator feels regret for his “foolish act” which refers to his instinctual action.

The Poem “snake” by D.H. Lawrence is an interesting text that deals with the complexities of human nature that brings towards our rational thinking. This Poem tells a tale of a person going to a water-trough and stumbles upon a snake. The person is fascinated and honoured, “was it perversity that I longed to talk to him?”, yet his upbringing tells that the snake ought to be killed, “the voice of my education said to me, he must be killed”. The Poem deals with the struggle within oneself, whether or not to follow one’s own natural instincts or one’s natural upbringing.

“Snake” can be understood on two levels, as narrative and symbol. On the simpler level, a Lawrence like speaker encounters a snake at his water-trough. Rapt by nearly hypnotic fascination, he allows the snake to drink, without taking action. Soliloquizing like Hamlet, the speaker wonders whether he is a coward not to kill the snake, because in Sicily golden snakes are venomous. The snake continues to drink until, satisfied, it climbs the broken bank of the wall-face, puts its head into “that dreadful hole” and withdraws “going into blackness”. At this point, the speaker throws a log at the water trough yet fails to hit the snake. Immediately he regrets his “pettiness” and wishes that the snake would come back, for it seemed to be like a king. The speaker has missed his chance with “one of the lords of life”.

On the narrative level, the Poem is perplexing because a reader cannot fathom why the speaker expresses his internal debate with such vehemence over the question of killing the snake. One is not necessarily a “coward” in avoiding a poisonous snake, nor is one “perverse” in longing to talk to one. What “voices” of his education demand that he kill the snake? On a deeper analysis, emphasizing on the psycho-analytical aspects of the Poem, it gets revealed that, the Poem also portrays the homosexual tendencies of the speaker. As explained in the second chapter of this Project, snake symbolises phallus and hence in the Poem, it stands for the speaker’s homosexual desires. In traditional and conservative societies, same sex relations or homosexual desires are a taboo and are strictly prohibited. The speaker being a member of such a society, is aware of it and hence his conscience reminds him that “the voice of my education said to me to kill the snake”. But the homosexual desires in the speaker’s unconscious is so very strong that he dares not to kill the snake. The speaker brilliantly describes the conflict between the speaker’s conscious on one side, and his conscience and conscious on the other. At once, his unconscious succeeds and “throws a log at the snake” which in psychoanalytical terms, stands for the expression of one’s sexual desire. Log is again a phallic symbol in psychoanalytical criticism. Immediately, the speaker’s conscience plays its role and he regrets at his “foolish act”. The speaker for the sake of the society in which he lives in, tries to suppress his homosexual desires. To achieve this he resorts to consider the snake to be a king, so that feelings of honour and respect would get instilled in the mind of the speaker. In psychoanalytic criticism, this process is called Sublimation. The conscience of the speaker resorts to this technique, as a means to repress his homosexual desires and instead to develop feelings of respect and honour towards same sex.

The psychoanalytic criticism adopts the methods of “reading” employed by Freud and later theorists to interpret texts. It argues that literary texts like dreams, express the secret unconscious desires and anxieties of the author, that a literary work is a manifestation of the author’s own neuroses. One interesting facet of this approach is that it validates the importance of literature, as it is built on literary key for decoding. Freud himself wrote, “The dream thoughts which we first come across as we proceed with our analysis often strikes us by the unusual form in which they are expressed: they are not clothed in the prosaic language usually employed by our thoughts, but are on the contrary represented symbolically by means of similes and metaphors, in images resembling those of poetic speech”. After 1950, the psychoanalytic critics began to emphasize the ways in which authors create works that appeal to reader’s repressed wishes and fantasies. Consequently, they shifted their focus from the author’s psyche toward the psychology of the reader and the text. Freud’s brief comment on the workings of the artist’s imagination at the end of the twenty-third lecture of his *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (1920), supplemented by relevant passages in the other lectures in that book, set forth the theoretical framework of what is sometimes called “classical” psychoanalytic criticism.

Literature and the other arts, like neurotic symptoms, consist of the imagined or fantasied, fulfilment of wishes that are either denied by reality or are prohibited by the social standards of morality and propriety. The forbidden, mainly sexual (libidinal) wishes come into conflict with, and are repressed by the “censor” (the internalized representative within each individual of the standards of society) into the unconscious realm of the artist’s mind, but are permitted by the censor to achieve a fantasied satisfaction in distorted forms which serve to disguise their real motives and objects from the conscious mind.

Thus, the psychoanalytic reading of the Poem “Snake” by D.H. Lawrence brings into limelight the homosexual tendencies and desires of the speaker and his attempts at repressing the desires for the sake of the society.

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