

# Ecocriticism in Literary Works: A Textual Analysis on Lawrence's Snake

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## Abstract:

Lawrence is one of the most influential writers of the 20th century. Ecological thoughts are conveyed from the perspective of ecocriticism in many of his works at that time. The praise of exuberant natural life is the theme of Lawrence's poetry collection *Bird, Beast, and Flower*. *Snake* is one of the best poems in the collection. Lawrence's poem *Snake* tells the story of a man's encounter with a snake, in which the snake symbolizes all the instincts of man as a "bloody life" indistinguishable from an animal. Based on the poem of *Snake*, this paper tries to present the image of the snake in the poem and deeply explores the poet's thinking about the nature of the snake. It explores the Western cultural tradition of the definition of snake to highlight Lawrence's subversion of traditional moral values. By analyzing the contradictory image of snake, the contradictory situation of "me", and the confession of "me", this paper draws out the contradictions between man and nature, thought and reality, and explores the strong "ecological consciousness" and "resistance consciousness" in the poem, wishing to provide some inspiration for solving the ecological crisis and the spiritual crisis of people in the global industrial age.

**Keywords:** Lawrence; Ecocriticism; Snake, Birds, Beasts, Flowers.

## 1. Introduction

D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930) is one of the most outstanding literary figures of the 20th century, whose position and contribution to English literature have long been recognized [1]. Lawrence's representative works *Rainbow*, *Women in Love*, *Sons and Lovers*, and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* are regarded as classic works of English literature. He was also a prolific poet, writing more than 1,000 poems during his lifetime. Lawrence's profound philosophical thoughts include his ecological thoughts, which are first expressed in his poetry. Lawrence's poems focus on nature, conveying the poet's philosophical thoughts on the universe and containing profound ecological concern.

Based on the theory of ecocentrism, ecocritics analyze, discuss, and criticize the relationship between literature, art, culture, nature, society, and the human spirit. It has the attributes of literary criticism and cultural criticism. In Lawrence's era, Britain has completed the industrial revolution and unprecedented "mechanization", which has become the most significant feature of this era. Lawrence witnessed the transformation of his hometown of Eastwood, Nottinghamshire, England, from a peaceful town to a coal mining site, which caused great damage to the ecological environment [2]. He was also deeply affected by

environmental pollution, suffering from lung disease. He spent most of his life traveling around Europe, searching for an ideal place to live. The special changes in the environment, the influence of early rural life, and the experience of traveling in Europe for many years enabled him to have a deep understanding of the life of industrial workers represented by miners, which also triggered his concern and reflection on the ecological problems caused by the development of industrial civilization. He was aware that while promoting economic development, industrial civilization had caused serious damage to the natural ecology, cut off the fresh, emotional relationship between man and nature, and affected the survival of human beings, which was consistent with the idea of ecocriticism. In *Rainbow*, *Woman in Love*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and other works, Lawrence expressed and criticized the "alienation" of human nature caused by industrial civilization, expressed his yearning for the beauty of natural harmony, and proposed that only by returning to the "natural nature of man can the return and reconstruction of natural ecology and human spiritual ecology be realized.

His rich ecological thoughts in poetry are worth further study. Lawrence's poetry collection 1932, *Birds, Beasts, Flowers*, fully demonstrated the author's ecological thoughts, including *Snake* [3]. Currently, most of the rel-

evant studies on the *Snake* aim to explore the snake's image meaning in Chinese and Western literary works or the animal aesthetic characteristics of the snake itself. Only a few researchers have involved the ecological issues implied in the poem but have not discussed the modern ecological proposition of "man and self." Therefore, this paper explores the rhetorical angles of metaphor, symbolism, and personification and points out the contradiction between man and nature in poetry. The double contradiction depicted in Lawrence's poem *Snake* subverts the traditional writing form of literary poetry, which expresses the author's appeal to ecology and rebellion against traditional thought.

## 2. Related Work

As a literary and cultural criticism theory, ecocriticism was established by European and American scholars in the mid-1990s. However, the term ecocriticism was first proposed in the 1970s. American scholar William Luckter first used it in his article *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* published in *Iowa Review* in 1978 [4]. Like many new things, ecocriticism, a literary theory, has also experienced a process of development from the edge to the center before establishing its position in the academic world. Throughout the 1980s, due to the lack of its school organization, scholars tried to conduct ecological research scattered, and ecocriticism did not enter the center of literature [5]. The definition of ecocriticism, accepted by most scholars, comes from Cheryl Groferty, "In short, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, just as female criticism examines language and literature from the perspective of gender consciousness, and by reading texts, Marxist criticism gives people a cognitive understanding of the mode of production and economic registration, ecocriticism takes a geocentric approach to literary research [6]."

Zeng Fanren, a Chinese scholar, believes that a universal symbiotic attitude of „non-anthropocentrism“ must be established to treat the natural environment, and „attitude determines everything“ [7]. Liu Bei believes that we should abandon the narrow sense of returning to nature and advocate a broader sense of returning to nature so as to achieve a real return to the inner world by studying ecological philosophy in literary texts. She believes that this is the first task of ecological literature and ecocriticism [8]. Wei Qingqi discusses ecocriticism from the perspective of Western „Logocentrism.“ In Western Greek, Logos refers to discourse, which was later extended to knowledge, learning, essence, structure, test questions, God, reason, etc. With Logos as the center, western literature combines

rationality and rights to construct a huge discourse system. But after entering the 20th century, Nietzsche finally announced the "death of God," and Heidegger overthrew the Western cultural tradition of dividing subject and object, thus fundamentally shaking the rule of Western Logos. Just as post-colonial criticism overthrew the Western Centralizing behind Logos, feminist criticism overthrew Logos as male chauvinism, and ecocriticism, under the atmosphere of post-modern deconstruction, overthrew Logos as anthropocentrism, which combines man and nature, which are opposed to subject and object in the universe [9]. Literary ecocriticism is still a popular perspective of literary criticism, which needs more attention and support from scholars [10]. No matter whether it is against or in favor of ecocriticism, ecocriticism is gradually moving from the edge to the center and becoming a hot spot in Western literary theory despite its different opinions.

## 3. Research Method

This study used a case study approach, a qualitative research method, to analyze Snake's content from the ecocriticism perspective. This method analyzes how Lawrence expresses his ecocriticism consciousness in his work *Snake*. The author has made a detailed reading of Lawrence's whole works and ecocriticism theory, which helps the author form a comprehensive understanding of this work. Through the dissection of this poem, three symbolic meanings of the snake are summarized--- divinity, devil, and individual. By analyzing these three symbolic meanings of the snake, the author elaborately interprets Lawrence's ecocriticism in the poem *Snake*.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This long poem has three symbolic meanings of the snake— "divinity, devil, and individual." At the end of the poem, the poet expresses his guilt after he hit the snake, while at the beginning, he shows a sense of affection for the snake. There is a paradox if the beginning and the end are discussed together. The reason why the poet has different feelings of the same snake is that:

At the beginning of the poem, the snake is described as a guest, just like a normal individual, who comes to the water trough to drink the water. Its body is portrayed meticulously to express the poet's affection for the snake. The detailed and descriptive words also draw readers' attention as if they watched the snake like the author. In the fifth stanza, the poet uses the word "someone" to replace the snake, which means that it is regarded as an individual rather than an animal. It is equal to human beings because the poet has to wait before the snake finishes drinking. Here, the poet portrays a harmonious scene in which hu-

man beings and animals are equal in nature.

In the eighth stanza, affection for the snake turns into the opposite. That indicates there is a paradox between man and animals. "For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous." This sentence draws the poet back to his reality. In his received education, black snakes should be killed as they are poisonous. There are two paradoxes; one is the feelings of the snake, and another is the symbolic meaning of the snake -- individual or devil. This is the first climax of this poem. A struggle begins to torture the poet's mind because he can't figure out if the snake is a devil or an individual. The following stanzas convey this complicated feeling:

*And voices in me said, If you were a man  
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?*

*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!*

*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.*

The above clip lets readers understand the predicament the poet is suffering. He loves the snake because it behaves like an individual, while the education he has received tells him that he must kill the snake because the black snake is the devil. He suffers a lot from the complicated mind, like or kill, individual or devil. Finally, he uses a clumsy log to hit the snake to obey the rules from his received education. However, the clumsy log doesn't hurt the snake. Even the snake is alive, the poet regrets his behavior. Then he writes:

*And I thought of the albatross,*

*And I wished he would come back, my snake.*

Here, the poet introduces another symbolic meaning of the snake-- divinity, for he regards the snake as the albatross, which can bring luck to human beings. This is the third symbolic meaning of the snake. The poet struggles again, for he badly treats the snake that can bring luck and goodness to human beings. Thus, the paradox appears again in the poet's mind:

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

*And I have something to expiate:*

*A pettiness.*

This is the last stanza of this poem. The snake is regarded as the lords of life. The poet expresses his pettiness again, for he hits the snake, who is the lord of life, like an individual in nature. It is independent and equal to human beings in nature. Throughout the poem, the poet struggles several times with the identity of the snake, individual, devil, divinity, and individual. This poem ends with the symbolic meaning of the individual, which is the one the poet wants to emphasize. Human beings, as the "wisest and most civilized" members of nature, should treat other life with a more tolerant and kinder attitude, understanding that nature is the eternal home of all life, including human beings. Only by maintaining an intimate relationship with nature can human beings truly embrace the vitality of life without feeling alienated and regretful.

Lawrence's poem *Snake* deeply expresses the poet's ecological awareness, foresight, and sagacity. This also causes readers to subvert the snake's innate cognition, "he" (the snake) is not only the incarnation of the devil but also the deity who should be viewed with equal vision. As an ordinary ecosystem member, human beings should live in harmony with nature. At the end of the poem, "I will be punished", Lawrence is reminding mankind to pay attention to ecological system. If mankind continues to be arrogant and ignorant, an "ecological crisis" will come in the future. The poet's confession also warns people to jump out of the shackles of tradition and learn to reflect rationally.

## 5. Conclusion

The poet puts living and non-living beings on an equal footing with human beings and uses anthropomorphic rhetoric to express feelings of love, respect, fear, and regret incisively and vividly. In Lawrence's poem, the love for life and the destruction of ecology by human beings are described through anthropomorphism. The poet's profound implication has certain enlightenment significance for the spread of "ecological culture". An in-depth study of Lawrence's ecological thought will be helpful to raise our ecological awareness and expand our ethical care of non-human life. Based on Lawrence's concern for nature and social ecology, these valuable ideas will certainly provide some inspiration for solving the current environmental and spiritual crises of global industrialization.

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