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# Serpentine Encounters: A Comparative Study of Human-Nature Relationships in D.H. Lawrence's "Snake" and Emily Dickinson's "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass"

**Dr Vikas Bhardwaj, Associate Professor**
Department of English
RKSD College, Kaithal

**Abstract**

This paper analyses "Snake" by D.H. Lawrence and Emily Dickinson's "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" as major poetic representations of human interaction with nature. Time differences and geographical separation between the poems together with distinct literary traditions do not hinder their ability to expose deep human connections with nature. This study looks closely at how two poets write about similar themes but use different writing styles. Both poets explore how humans interact with nature, showing the conflict between our natural instincts and what we have been taught, along with our mixed feelings of respect and fear toward nature's mysterious qualities. Lawrence writes in a free-flowing, storytelling style without strict patterns, while Dickinson uses a much shorter, more compact approach where she leaves things unsaid. Despite these differences, both poets give detailed descriptions of snakes—how they look and how they make people feel. Neither poet makes the relationship between humans and nature overly simple or emotional. This is why their insights still matter in today's conversations about the environment.

**Keywords**

Comparative Poetics, D.H. Lawrence, Emily Dickinson, Human-Nature Relationship, Environmental Ethics, Serpent Imagery, Poetic Form, Literary Modernism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, Ecological Consciousness, Otherness, American Poetry, British Poetry, Nature Symbolism, Anthropocentrism

## Introduction

Looking at literature throughout history, snakes have been powerful symbols with two sides -- they have been seen as the tempter in the Bible but also as symbols of wisdom, harbingers of death but also symbols of rebirth. Two remarkable poems about encounters with snakes are D.H. Lawrence's "Snake" (1923) and Emily Dickinson's "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" (1866). Though these poets lived in different times, on different continents, and wrote in different styles, their poems share interesting similarities in how they explore our relationship with nature, while still maintaining their unique approaches to form, style, and philosophy. This research paper examines how both Lawrence and Dickinson use encounters with snakes to explore the conflict between our natural instincts and what society has taught us, how we feel both fear and fascination, and our complex relationship with the unknown. By closely analysing their writing techniques, themes, and how critics have received their work, this study shows how these poems continue to speak to us as deep reflections on the human condition and our place in nature. The analysis also looks at how both poets use the snake to represent "the other" - something fundamentally separate from

human experience yet deeply connected to how we understand ourselves and our relationship with the natural world.

**Biographical and Historical Context**

Dickinson composed "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" in 1866, during America's post-Civil War period. Her scientific interest in the natural world combined with metaphysical concerns about mortality and the limits of human understanding infuses her snake poem with both precision and mystery. Dickinson's poetry frequently places the material world in conversation with the immaterial, creating a productive tension between the observable and the ineffable. As Vendler observes, "Dickinson knew that poetic influence does not die with the death of the writer" (6). Her relative seclusion allowed for intense observation of nature's minute details, which she transformed into metaphysical explorations. Lawrence wrote "Snake" during his self-imposed exile in Sicily in the early 1920s, a period when he was deeply engaged with questions about modern civilization's disconnection from natural instincts. This period is crucial in Lawrence's development. Lawrence's time in Sicily heightened his awareness of Mediterranean cultures' different relationship with the natural world. It was in contrast with the industrialized West's increasing alienation from nature. Kinkead-Weekes observes: "After Capri, he must have been particularly pleased to have found a place outside Taormina, though within easy walking distance. He thought from the first that he could work there, and so he did. Though he met numbers of people, Italian and expatriate, he could also get away from them to his (rather handsome) desk in the salotta, or his garden with his great carob tree, or walking the slopes" (571). It was under the strange-scented shade of carob tree that Lawrence had his encounter with the snake. The poem explicitly references the Sicilian landscape and Mount Etna, grounding the encounter in Lawrence's lived experience while simultaneously elevating it to a mythic confrontation between competing aspects of human consciousness.

**Poetic Form and Style: Contrasting Approaches to Serpent Encounters**

**Structural and Stylistic Differences**

The most immediately apparent difference between these poems lies in their formal structure. Lawrence's "Snake" employs free verse with irregular line lengths that create a conversational, almost prose-like quality. The poem unfolds in a narrative sequence with temporal markers ("And then," "And as," "And immediately") that trace both the physical movements of the snake and the psychological journey of the speaker. Gilbert observes that Lawrence continued to develop the belief that poetry "was an organic process equivalent to the pulse and play of a healthy body" reflecting his belief that poetic rhythm should mirror organic processes rather than mechanical patterns (79). This fluidity of form allows Lawrence to capture the moment-by-moment development of the speaker's complex response. In contrast, Dickinson's "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" adheres more closely to conventional form, employing ballad meter (alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter) with her characteristic variations. Miller notes that "Most of Dickinson's form/class grammatical experiments involve adjectives and nouns: adjectives, verbs, and adverbs function as nouns, and nouns function, most often, as adjectives...Noun becomes adjective in the famous snake poem 'A Narrow Fellow in the Grass'" (60). This economy of expression creates a productive dialectic between the familiar hymn-like form and the uncanny content, reflecting the poem's thematic concern with the simultaneously familiar and alien aspects of nature. Lawrence's diction tends toward the colloquial and immediate ("hot, hot day," "in pyjamas for the heat"), establishing an intimate, confessional voice that invites readers to witness both the external event and internal conflict. Sagar argues that "The technical means (in, for example, the third stanza) are

obvious without being at all facile—the sibilant, slithering, alliterative s's, the slack, undulating rhythms, the whole stanza trailing through one sentence of seven long lines" (121). Dickinson, conversely, employs more oblique language, substituting "a narrow fellow" for "snake" throughout, creating linguistic defamiliarization that mirrors the elusive nature of her subject. Sewall argues that "Certainly one of the strengths of her nature poems lies in their firm substratum of knowledge and accurate observation" (345).

**Voice and Perspective: Narrative Strategies**

Both poems employ first-person perspectives but to different effects. Lawrence's speaker directly addresses the reader, creating an unmediated confessional tone. The narration has temporal specificity—it recalls a particular encounter on "a hot, hot day" in Sicily. The poem presents internal struggles, remorse, and self-blame in an overt manner, which generates an impression of psychological tension developing as the reader progresses through the work. This transparency allows readers to witness the speaker's internal struggle between societal conditioning and instinctual response. Dickinson's speaker is more elusive, shifting between past and present tense, between childhood recollections and general observations. Her use of indefinite articles ("A narrow fellow") and occasional shifts to second-person address ("You may have met him") create a more universal, less temporally specific encounter. Johnson observes that "... in 1862 the poet was no longer a novice but an artist whose strikingly original talent was fully developed." (page vi, Introduction). The poem's conclusion suddenly intensifies into a visceral, personal response ("Without a tighter breathing, / And zero at the bone"), but even this remains more cryptic than Lawrence's explicit self-analysis.

**Rhythm and Sound: The Musicality of Encounter**

The sounds created by both poems amply reveal how differently each poet experienced their snake encounter. Lawrence's writing flows like a winding river—his lines stretch and curve, one thought spilling naturally into the next without pause. When he begins many lines with "And," readers feel lulled into the same trance that seems to hold him as he watches the snake. There exists something almost musical in this repetition, like a slow, mesmerizing heartbeat beneath the poem. Dickinson, though working in a smaller space, creates her own kind of music. Her rhythm feels like gentle footsteps—four beats, then three, then four again—but one can hear how she subtly breaks this pattern, much like a snake's movement is not perfectly predictable. When she writes "The grass divides as with a comb," the soft, hissing sounds make listeners hear the whisper of scales against grass. It is as if she wants readers not just to see the snake but to hear its secret passage through the world. Consonants, especially repeated 's' sounds, are arranged throughout the poem to create a sonic representation of the silent slithering movement being depicted.

**Thematic Convergences: Shared Territories of Exploration**

**Human Education versus Instinctive Response**

A striking parallel between the poems is their exploration of tension between learned responses and instinctive reactions to snakes. Lawrence explicitly frames this conflict: "The voice of my education said to me / He must be killed," contrasting this with his instinctive admiration for the creature. Worthen observes that "He wrote wonderfully all his life about his experience of the natural world; he was more perceptive than almost any writer before or since, about the effects of civilization upon instinct and desire" (xxv-xxvi). This internal struggle serves as a microcosm for Lawrence's broader critique of civilization's suppression of natural instincts. Dickinson approaches this theme more subtly. Her speaker notes familiarity with many of "nature's people" toward whom

she feels "a transport / Of cordiality," yet the snake triggers an involuntary physical response despite this general affinity for wildlife. Wolff suggests that "the progress of the poem moves the snake into some undefined psychological relationship with the speaker, a move away from simple realism towards a portent of danger" (489). Both poems thus explore the gap between what we intellectually know and how we instinctively react, particularly when confronted with creatures that provoke primal responses. This thematic exploration reaches beyond the moment with the snake to touch on something deeper—human separation from the natural world. Both poets see how learning and education work in curious ways. On one hand, knowledge helps people comprehend nature's mysteries; on the other, it builds invisible walls between humans and direct experience. Through their encounters with these creatures, the poets examine a fundamental human struggle: people belong to nature, their bodies made of the same substance as all living things, yet their minds often place them outside it. Rehearsed responses and traditional teachings create a distance—humans observe rather than participate, analyse rather than feel. In the space between what society knows and what people instinctively sense, both poets find a tension that speaks to the human condition.

**Reverence and Fear: The Ambivalence of Encounter**

Both works blend wonder and dread. Lawrence's speaker experiences a profound sense of privilege in the snake's company, yet beneath this honour lurks an undeniable current of fear and unease. This ambivalence is central to the poem's psychological tension—the speaker recognizes the snake as "one of the lords / Of life" deserving respect, yet cannot fully overcome his fear taught by the society. Gilbert suggests that "Yet though his nerve-brain self enables—even forces—man to go beyond the instinctive *being* of animals to a form of knowledge that transcends nature, man is nevertheless irrevocably part of nature" (164). The internal conflict creates a powerful drama of conscience as the speaker struggles between competing impulses. Dickinson likewise acknowledges both familiarity with nature's creatures and instinctive dread when encountering the snake. While Lawrence's response involves an intellectual component, Dickinson's reaction is more purely physiological: "Without a tighter breathing, / And zero at the bone." Knickerbocker argues that "the speaker feels petrified but it does not imply that the snake is evil or should be vanquished. In fact, the poem is more about the speaker's own fear than about the snake itself, which the speaker twice calls 'Fellow,' not a sinister name" (193). This bodily reaction suggests that our deepest responses to nature cannot be fully contained by intellectual understanding. The ambivalence both poets describe has philosophical implications. Kinkead-Weekes observes that "If life itself is primary, then it is essential to identify, within the growth of the fertilised cell and the interaction of different impulses in the creation of individuals, how they may both become more harmoniously creative in themselves, and interactively fulfil the creative purpose in all things" (659). This acceptance of paradox challenges the Enlightenment preference for clear categorical distinctions, suggesting instead that truth might reside precisely in the tension between opposing emotional responses.

**Nature's Otherness and Sovereignty: Recognizing the Non-Human**

Perhaps the most profound thematic convergence is the recognition of nature's fundamental otherness and sovereignty. Lawrence describes the snake looking "like a god, unseeing, into the air" and compares it to "a king in exile," according it dignity and autonomy separate from human concerns. The poem concludes with regret at having violated this sovereignty through a "petty" human act. Registering Lawrence's attribution of dignity and autonomy to non-human life, Sagar

comments: "But often the deeper purpose of these poems is to reveal the sheer unknowable otherness of the non-human life" (121). Dickinson similarly acknowledges the snake's independence from human understanding. Despite her familiarity with many natural creatures, this "fellow" remains essentially unknowable. The poem's focus on the snake's elusiveness—how it appears suddenly and vanishes just as quickly—underscores nature's resistance to human categories and control. Dickinson's snake exists primarily on its own terms, not as an object of human comprehension but as a subject with its own mysterious existence. This recognition of non-human subjectivity represents a significant philosophical stance for both poets. Through their portrayal of snakes as autonomous and superior beings, Lawrence and Dickinson contest the human-cantered belief that humans hold a privileged status within nature. This viewpoint foreshadows modern environmental ethics which values nature for its inherent worth instead of treating it only as a human resource or projection surface.

**Imagery and Symbolism: Techniques of Representation**

**Lawrence's Vivid Sensory Portrayal**

Lawrence slowly and vividly describes the snake, mentioning its "yellow-brown slackness," the way it "softly drank through his straight gums," and how it flickered "his two-forked tongue." These details build a full, almost respectful image of the snake, highlighting its presence and grace. Through his rich descriptions, Lawrence transforms an ordinary moment into something almost magical, making it a lasting and profound experience. This sensory immediacy establishes the snake as a fully realized presence rather than merely a symbolic construct. The symbolism in Lawrence's poem extends beyond the snake itself to encompass the setting. The "deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob tree" creates an almost primordial atmosphere, while the reference to Mount Etna—"with Etna smoking"—adds a mythic dimension to the encounter. Kinkead-Weekes suggests that "Sicily appealed to him in some of the ways Cornwall had done, albeit even more southerly in terms of the magnetic pull on his soul" (571). These environmental details establish a context that amplifies the significance of the encounter beyond a mere chance meeting. Lawrence's imagery becomes increasingly metaphorical as the poem progresses. The snake is described as "like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld, / Now due to be crowned again." The royal metaphor makes the meeting special, showing both the human and the snake as equally important creatures that deserve to live their own lives. When the speaker disrupts this moment of mutual recognition by throwing a log at the water trough, the imagery shifts to express self-recrimination, with allusions to Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in the reference to "the albatross." This intertextual connection places the speaker's actions within a literary tradition of human transgression against the natural world and subsequent need for expiation.

**Dickinson's Fragmentary Glimpses**

Dickinson's imagery is more fragmentary and metaphorical. Her snake is "a spotted shaft," "a whip-lash / Unbraiding in the sun," offering glimpses rather than a sustained view. This approach mimics the actual experience of glimpsing a snake in tall grass—partial, fleeting, requiring interpretation of fragments. Dickinson's fragmentary imagery reveals how human perception falters when attempting to capture nature's most elusive creatures—offering glimpses that highlight our limited capacity to fully comprehend the natural world.

Her famous final image of "zero at the bone" conveys visceral fear through abstract rather than literal description, exemplifying her technique of slant perception. The grass itself becomes a

significant image in Dickinson's poem, as it "divides as with a comb" to reveal the snake momentarily before closing again. Porter argues that, "When she is successful, she is marvelously inventive and suggestive. Her performance serves always to display the language. In the Snake poem she shows us less the way a snake looks than how ingenuity can reanimate language and put it up to saying new things, make us see afresh the life within language itself apart from an exterior reality... Her word looks in a new way at a snake. In the end not making the snake more snaky, but the language itself presumptuous autonomous" (57). While Lawrence provides a sustained observation of the snake at the water trough, Dickinson offers a series of brief, disjointed glimpses that enhance the creature's mystery. Dickinson's choice to refer to the snake as a "Fellow" throughout the poem creates a complex interplay of familiarity and strangeness. By giving human qualities to the snake while maintaining its essential difference, the poem creates a paradox: the creature becomes a "Fellow" deserving respect, yet remains ultimately unknowable despite this attempt at connection—highlighting the limitations of human understanding when confronting the non-human. This tension between recognition and alienation shows how complicated human relationships with nature can be.

**Philosophical Underpinnings: Divergent Worldviews**

Despite their thematic similarities, the poems diverge significantly in their philosophical implications. Lawrence's poem, aligned with his intellectual vision, delivers a pointed critique of Western society's estrangement from nature's wisdom. The speaker's social conditioning stops him from having a more natural response to the snake. The poem suggests healing comes through rediscovering those profound, instinctive connections with fellow creatures—essential bonds humans have forgotten yet remain within reach. Within these lines emerges Lawrence's broader aspiration to revitalize a modern existence he perceived as increasingly mechanical and devoid of vitality, offering readers a path back to authentic engagement with the living world around them.

Lawrence's philosophical orientation draws on vitalism—the belief in a life force or energy that transcends mechanical explanation. Kinkead-Weekes notes that "So the inner serpents of the marsh of the subconscious must come out into the light. They cannot in any case be killed; and what we try to exclude exerts over us tyranny of repulsive fascination" (370). The poem's conclusion, with its expression of regret and desire for expiation, suggests that redemption lies in recovering this connection rather than maintaining artificial barriers between human and non-human life. Dickinson's philosophical stance is more ambiguous. Her poem acknowledges the unbridgeable gap between human consciousness and the natural other without suggesting this separation is purely negative or capable of being overcome. The "zero at the bone" suggests an essential, perhaps necessary distance between human and snake, between consciousness and nature's unconscious being. Instead of mourning how civilization corrupts our natural instincts, Dickinson acknowledges that the simultaneous experience of attraction and repulsion is an essential aspect of human existence. Dickinson's approach reflects her engagement with both Transcendentalist and post-Transcendentalist thought. While Emerson and Thoreau emphasized the possibility of communion with nature, Dickinson's poetry often acknowledges the limits of such connection. Dickinson recognizes nature's ultimate otherness without reducing its significance; indeed, the snake's very inscrutability becomes the source of its power to affect the human observer. This position anticipates modernist skepticism about Romantic notions of nature while maintaining nature's importance as a source of meaning and emotional response.

## Critical Perspectives: Interpretative Frameworks

### Psychoanalytic Readings: The Snake as Psychological Symbol

Both poems have invited psychoanalytic interpretations that explore the snake as a symbol of repressed psychic content. Lawrence, who was familiar with Freudian theory, creates a scenario that readily lends itself to such analysis. The meeting at the watering place reveals an internal struggle between our civilized persona and those primal impulses society has taught us to fear and suppress. The speaker's ambivalence toward the snake thus represents a broader ambivalence toward aspects of the self that civilization has taught him to reject. The phallic associations of the snake are difficult to ignore in Lawrence's poem, particularly given his broader interest in sexuality as a vital life force.

Trail argues that. "The greatness of Lawrence's 'Snake' lies...in the courage it demonstrates in presenting a traumatic incident with utter fidelity to its psychological dynamics" (356). The poem's conclusion, with its expression of regret for driving the snake away, can thus be read as a lament for the disconnection from embodied experience that Lawrence believed characterized modern life. Dickinson's poem has also been subject to psychoanalytic readings, though often with different emphases. Thus, "the 'narrow Fellow' can be interpreted as representing unconscious fears or desires that briefly emerge into consciousness before being repressed again. The poem's famous conclusion—"Zero at the bone"—suggests a moment of encounter with what exceeds symbolic representation and disrupts the subject's sense of coherence.

### Ecological Interpretations: Proto-Environmental Consciousness

More recent critical approaches have emphasized the ecological dimensions of both poems, viewing them as early articulations of environmental consciousness. Lawrence's explicit critique of human arrogance toward nature aligns with contemporary environmental ethics. Sagar argues that "'Snake' is, by general agreement, the finest poem in the book. It is particularly apposite to this discussion because it is virtually a dialogue between the poet's two selves—the 'young man' and the 'demon', the voice of education and the voice of the spontaneous self" (120). The speaker's regret for his action against the snake represents an emergent ecological conscience that recognizes the moral significance of human behaviour toward other species. Bell observes that in "Snake," "Lawrence, sought to 'define' experientially the proper relation of the human to the animal; and thereby, of course, the human to itself and to the Being of the world" (200). Dickinson's more ambiguous stance also contains ecological insights. According to Knickerbocker, "The young Dickinson spent a considerable amount of time exploring the woods and fields around Amherst, collecting flower specimens for her herbarium and often encountering the birds, bees, frogs, and snakes-'Nature's People' that later populate her poems" (187). Her recognition of the fundamental otherness of the snake challenges anthropocentric perspectives that measure nature's value solely in human terms. Dickinson's willingness to acknowledge both connection with and alienation from nature represents a more nuanced ecological position than simple celebration of harmony with the natural world. This dual awareness—that nature is both familiar and ultimately unknowable—creates a position of respectful distance that avoids both sentimental idealization and exploitative domination. According to White, "The individual is alienated from society, from the natural world, from the cosmos" (98). Both poems, from this perspective, challenge the human tendency to impose meaning on nature rather than recognizing its independent existence. Lawrence and Dickinson, in their different ways, present the snake not primarily as a symbol or metaphor but as a being with its own reality and integrity. This recognition of non-human subjectivity represents

an important contribution to environmental thought, suggesting that ethical relationships with nature begin with acknowledging its fundamental alterity.

**Gender and Power Dynamics: Alternative Readings**

Feminist studies examine how gender roles influence human-snake interactions in these poems. In "Snake," the meeting exposes male anxieties about power. Lawrence critiques the idea of human control over nature when the speaker feels a violent urge toward the snake, reflecting societal views of human superiority. The speaker's later regret suggests alternative masculinities built on respect, not domination. Dickinson's poem presents a different gendered viewpoint. Her speaker does not act violently but observes the snake and notes her bodily reactions. This shows an engagement with nature based on attentive observation, not control. Both poems disrupt traditional Western gender stereotypes that link men to rationality and women to nature. Lawrence and Dickinson propose new ways of interacting with nature beyond rigid gender roles.

**Tone and Mood: Emotional Landscapes**

The poems depict contrasting emotional journeys during snake encounters. In "Snake," feelings shift from calmness to fascination, then inner conflict and regret. This emotional arc drives a moral awakening. Lawrence's repetitive use of "And" heightens the tension. The poem's pacing quickens as the speaker throws the log, then slows during reflection, mirroring his turmoil.

Dickinson's poem balances curiosity with unease, maintaining a watchful tone. The speaker begins with detached observation, creating a calm surface that sharpens the shock of the final lines: "Without a tighter breathing, / And zero at the bone." This chilling conclusion contrasts with the earlier restraint. While "Snake" mourns a lost connection to nature, Dickinson's poem unsettles readers by transforming familiar settings into eerie spaces. Lawrence's fear stems from human failure to respect nature, while Dickinson explores how everyday scenes can reveal hidden strangeness.

**Reception and Influence: Literary Legacies**

Both poems have shaped literary and environmental thought. "Snake" is a cornerstone of ecological writing, aligning with 20th-century environmental movements. Early critics viewed it through psychological or mythological lenses, while modern scholars emphasize its environmental themes. Dickinson's poem remains influential in American poetry for blending precise natural imagery with emotional depth. Farr notes: "In that Wordsworthian age of devout nature worship, poets and painters alike praised floral and plant forms by regarding them closely. Men as well as women artists made thousands of careful studies of both tiny and large plants and flowers, attempting to discover in the intricacy of their forms and the cycle of their lives some link between creation and the Creator" (29). Dickinson's focus on nature's details to express emotional truths continues to inspire writers.

Early analyses of Dickinson's work highlighted its technical skill, but feminist and ecological readings now explore its themes of bodily awareness and human-nature relationships. Both poems challenge divisions between humans and nature, fear and reverence. Lawrence imagines reconnection with nature; Dickinson stresses inevitable distance. Their lasting relevance lies in transforming specific encounters into universal explorations of human experience.

**Conclusion: Poetic Encounters with the Non-Human**

Though written in different styles—Lawrence's narrative flow versus Dickinson's concise imagery—both poems use snakes to probe humanity's bond with nature. They capture the physical reality of the creature and the psychological impact on the observer. Snakes here are not mere symbols but tools to examine human contradictions: attraction and alienation, instinct versus culture.

These poems resist simplistic views of nature. They acknowledge human fascination with non-human life while honoring its mystery. Both poets position humans as part of yet separate from nature, feeling both awe and fear. In an era of environmental crisis, their work gains urgency. Lawrence and Dickinson teach that true connection with nature begins by accepting our shared existence with other beings, alongside recognition of difference. Their poems remind us that humility and honesty are vital to engaging the natural world.

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