The Snake: A study of paranoia

Eijirō Yoshizawa

First, I will summarize this short story by John Steinbeck, "The Snake". A dark lady suddenly comes to Dr. Philip's office to see a snake. Her strong desire is to own a snake and feed it to satisfy its powerful appetite. She also wants to stay with it, hopefully leaving its dangerous poison intact. When we finally understand this lady's extraordinary wish it is bound to give us an abominable aversion. While we experience such feelings, however, I find it stimulating to search the real intentions of the dark lady. Steinbeck is indirectly challenging the reader to reach a conclusion on this point.

It is no wonder that Dr. Philip is embarrassed at such unusual behaviour as hers and most of the readers will sympathize with Dr. Philip. In other words, he has ill feelings mixed with annoyance toward her,
As I said earlier, the lady abnormally is enchanted by a snake, so it might be worthwhile to inquire into a snake as symbol. Symbolism will be produced when natural things present something invisible. Human beings live in nature and see things round them and meditate. On the other hand, they unconsciously are inclined to combine their mental products with those things viewed from their naked eye. This is when the operation of symbolism takes place between them. The act is to make the symbolism clear, which, in turn, will create brandnew signs and any conducive action which results. These will be transmitted to the coming generation and the resultant action could be a springboard resulting in fruitful creative activity.

Tradition tells us a snake which catches game and put it to death means “overwhelming power”. The poisonous nature signifies “evilness”. Shedding skin has close connection with “Life” and “revival”. A crawling figure suggests “waves”. “Wisdom” and “spirituality” leads to the mystery of oceans. In Greek mythology Dyonymsos wears the crown of a snake figure as a symbol of “abundance”. Radone which is a snake, guards golden apples representing sacred watchmen. Ascrepes, a medical god, has a snake representing curative power, and Heler tries to murder Heracles, a hero, but a snake is sent to the
beside, which is a representative of or symbol of jealousy. Depoy is known as a grave of great snakes and it combines with oracle. In Christianity snakes represent slyness, temptation, sin as incarnation of Demon, however, when a blue copper is attached to the flag Moses has made in the wilderness, it anticipates Christ, in other words, meaning salvation. On the other hand, in the New Testament, a snake is representative of wisdom. A snake (Uroboros), which worries over its own tail, in due course, will form a circle, which means eternal sculpturing on the grave. As seen in the explanation above, snake has number of symbolical meanings, and in my opinion it is fitting to some degree to keep those simbolicity in mind in grasping the meanings of this story, because Steinbeck was absorbed in reading the Bible before he was well known as a representative novelist in the U.S. It would seem that Steinbeck was having a certain image tinted with the Bible against snakes. Considering what the lady is seeking from symbolical aspects, affluence, healing capacity, life, renewal, sagacity, relief, and imperishability are main concepts. What can be supposed as a hypothesis is that the tall lady might be single and love lorn or broken hearted. In any case, she seems to be desperately attempting a trying situation. Her psychological struggling emerges out of her interrelations
and the snake. Her close affinity toward the snake will be put to an end in the end, which fact may prove that she has taken hold of what she is aiming at and another strong possibility which has to be considered is that she might harbor ill feeling toward Philip because he makes clear his objection to her return. The fact that she unusually adheres to a he-snake seems to point to her distorted sexual gratification of a kind.

The intention of this work is rather obscure, and it can be a matter of course, because Steinbeck refers to this writing as the contents being a true story and he is doing nothing else but simply narrating it. In other words he didn’t give the story special meaning. After publication this story created a number of reflections contrary to his expectations. For instance, a religious group criticized his deformed imagination. Steinbeck does not mention any interpretation of this writing. All these situations tell us Steinbeck afforded no particular design in his writing it. Such being the case, what is his hidden motivation in which such anomalous psychology shows itself. That is, the readers are inclined to take interest in how he put his ideas into a form of a story. By exploring his underlying motives, if any, we may clarify his veiled, unconscious incentives. Before proceeding to the following stage, it sounds both necessary and
profitable to grasp the main situation about this incident eventually given his springboard for producing this story in the first place.

Mysteries were constant at the laboratory. A thing happened one night which I later used as a short story. I wrote it just as it happened I don't know what it means and do not even answer the letters asking what its philiolop philosophic intent is. It just happened. Very briefly, this is the incident. A woman came in one night wanting to buy a male rattle snake. It happened that we had one and knew it was a male because it had recently copulated with another snake in the cage. The woman paid for the sake and then insisted that it be fed. She paid for a white rat to be given it. Ed put the rat in the cage. The snake struck and killed it and then unhinged its jaws preparatory to swallowing it. The frightening thing was that the woman, who had watched the process closely, moved her jaws and stretched her mouth just as the snake, was doing. After the rat was swallowed, she paid for a year's supply of rats and said she would come back. But she never did come back. What happened or why I have no idea. Whether the woman was driven by a sexual, a religions, a zoophilic, or a gustatory impulse we never could figure. When I wrote the story just as it happened there were curious reactions. One librarian
wrote that it was not only a bad story but the worst story she had ever read. A number of orders came in for snakes. I was denounced by a religious group for having a perverted imagination, one man found symbolism of Moses smiting the rock in the account.

(From “About Ed Ricketts”)

As Reloy Georcia says “The nameless woman is closely identified with the snake itself”; her looks echo those of the snake; she has a “flat forehead”, and her chin is very “short”, and also her movement is just like that of the snake. To kill the snake, therefore, means to kill the woman. If one should accept this theory, one could realize any identification between the woman and the snake. The snake gets sufficient satisfaction by taking in rats. The very gratification seems to lead to her completion for desires. Careful readers are able to sense her perverted narcissism in this point. This abnormalcy can be seen in a series of “long valleys”, for instance, “white quail” etc. It is almost possible for us to take a look at Steinbeck’s mentality in which he wrote such narratives at that time. His married life was in a critical situation, which reflects itself in the above-mentioned works. Steinbeck divorced his wife four years after finishing “The Long valley”. It would be realistic to assume that his conflicts and worries in his real life insensibly affect his way of
writing. The present writer touches on this narcissism to a certain degree in a previous internal publication information. Such narcissism seems to remain also in the connection between the snake and the woman. This narcissism can be perceived in Iliza in "Chrysanthemums," Mary in "White Quail" and the dark lady in "The Snake". Iliza is betrayed by a tinker in the end. Mary experiences a grievous incident when her husband shoots her loving quail. The dark lady is an object of hatred. These women, who are representative in the Long Valley, are subject to bad situations. One feels inclined to search the overall feelings of Steinbeck toward women. The anguish of Steinbeck’s real life are transfigured into these stories and he seems to get a sort of catharsis by the production of writings. Such a way of thinking could be a natural result. Incidentally, there is a clear difference about the sexual drive between Philip and the dark lady. The original passages will serve to understand this delicate situation, so let them be quoted. (“When starfish are sexually mature they release sperm and ova when they are exposed at low tide. By choosing mature specimens and taking them out of the water, I give them a condition of low tide. Now I’ve mixed the sperm and eggs. Now I put one of the mixture in each one of these ten watch glasses. In ten minutes I will kill those in the first glass with
menthol, twenty minutes later I will kill the second group and then a new group every twenty minutes. Then I will have arrested the process in stages, and I will mount the series of microscope lids for biologic study”. He paused. “Would you like to look at this first group under the microscope!”

Philip tries to arouse her interest but in vain. She shows no concern in his suggestions. Philip takes it for granted that human beings are liable to assume the similar attitude towards libido. The thing is that women feel no visible excitement as to the sexual urge. Such emotion is reached in a different way between men and women. The lady tries to keep an inanition against Philip in spite of his repeated proposal that he is inclined to incite her sexual impetus. Psychological warfare has started from here between the two.

By the way Philip’s frame of mind as a biologist presents itself in a plain manner in the following passage. (“He hated people who made sport of natural processes. He was not a sportsman but a biologist. He could kill a thousand animals for knowledge, but not an insect for pleasure. He’d been over this in his mind before”). This means Philip is never experimenting for mere pleasure. Snakes are in the same condition in that they also take in food for sustaining their lives. The common
factor between a scientist and a snake appear on this score. Human beings can be, as it were, a slave superior to men in point of separation from various sorts of worldly desires which may produce cruelties. Men surely experience joy simply in gratifying their desires, however, it is like lightening before they wander into a maze of worldly sufferings.

Now, the lady is completely charmed with the snake and readers will encounter the scenes as an identification between the two. The original text is as follows, (“I want to feed my snake”, she said, “I’ll put him in the other case.”) She had opened the top of the cage and dipped her hand in before she knew what she was doing. A snake will prove to be an object of attachment to the extent of aberration. The snake can be considered as being an object of her satisfying desires. It would seem that the snake is viewed as a symbol of male organs.

The following is not necessarily relative to the original text, but is quoted here for reference:

Every race in the primeval age believed a snake to be his god almost without exception. The reason is quite simple and clear, that is to say, a sliding snake on earth without legs makes primitive men feel that it is something mystic. When you watch the motion of a snake very closely, it will be more and more strange and weird. It has enticing magic
power and is magnetic. The slippery motion will eventually be a wonder and it must influence your emotion directly.

Beside the motion of a snake, the shape also struck the heart of ancient people. Generally the head of reptiles is similar to the male organ, and snake which seems to be a line from top to tail represents male organ. Very ancient people fully realized the source of vitality there and came to respect a snake as spirit, it would seem. A poisonous snake can murder an opponent with single hit which is bigger and stronger than himself. It seems that such strongness is an essential condition to original soul. Also, in the ecology of a snake, ecdysis is quite exquisite. A snake sheds its skin all over and can renew his life. The above-mentioned story is foreign to human beings. To ancients a snake is completely different and it has a lot of mysterious aspects. It is small wonder that a snake will be the object of admiration. Ancients were earnestly imitating the inborn powers of snake, so ancients tries to set a relation between a snake and a man, namely, they considered themselves to be an descendant of a snake.

She has identified herself with the snake as the present writer pointed out earlier. In other words a snake is considered to be fair sex. This leads to the fact that a snake has a quality of both sexes. I
referred to the psychological battle between Philip and woman, the following original text shows the scene of Philip being embarrassed by the woman’s overwhelming behaviour (especially dark eyes). We are able to perceive the woman’s psychological superiority. At the same time it is evident that Philip’s conscience as a biologist is firm. The plausible reason is that some rats are put into the cage of a snake (which means that the lady’s desire will be satisfied) and this fact gives much pleasure to the woman, on the other hand this is a kind of play to Philip. He finds it sinful to a certain extent. One can grasp the contrast between the woman—she is sexually frustrated. —and a biologist (Philip) Philip has clearly been oppressed mentally so far by the lady. However, he will soon assume a defiant attitude toward her. The mental struggle between the two gets more and more intense. The following description shows clearly the countering situation. —Suddenly he turned angrily to the woman. “Would n’t you rather put in a cat! Then you’d see a real fight. The cat might even win, but if it did it might kill the snake. I’ll see you a cat if you like.” Yet the lady aptly evades his counterreaction.

All things in this story considered, the snake is in the middle and Philip and the dark lady are on the end, namely, playing a see-saw game. In other
words, the snake is playing the role of "modifier" while Philip and the dark lady are engaging in psychological warfares. In this see-saw game the "withdrawal" of dark lady gives rise to the disappearance of tension and in return, the doctor falls into a sense of insecurity. After the lady's intrusion, there is an emptiness. The emptiness gives place to a sort of affection towards the lady. This shows clearly in the following: "For weeks he expected her to return." I will go out and leave her alone here when she comes, "he decided. I won't see the damned thing again. "She never came again. For months he looked for her when he walked about in the town. Several times he ran after some tall woman thinking it might be she. But he never saw her again... ever,"

In this way the fires of conflict between the two have gone out. It would seem that the beauty of this short story is the change in the process from mental battle into Philip's calmness and feeble affinity toward the dark lady. And in conclusion, to my way of thinking, Steinbeck's intent is to represent a woman's paranoia through the snake, using the description of the abnormal scenes involving the dark lady and the doctor.
Reference

Yoshino, Yûko, Nihonjin no shiseikan
(Kôdansha Gendaishinsho)