



## COLLISION OF EROS AND THANATOS IN “THE SNAKE”

“YILAN”DA EROS VE THANATOS ÇATIŞMASI

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### Abstract

John Steinbeck's well-known short story “The Snake” is generally accepted as a mysterious work whose motivations and message are unknown simply because the author declares so. Steinbeck relates that the event narrated in the story actually happened and he simply put the incident in words just as it happened. Both the readers and the critics have mostly accepted Steinbeck's explanation and did not question it. However, a Freudian investigation of the short story reveals that the piece is a well-thought and well-crafted work that demonstrates the collision of life and death instincts, i.e., Eros and Thanatos. Consequently, the present paper first aims to explicate Freud's arguments on life and death instincts and then illustrate how the action of the characters, as depicted in the short story, are clearly associated with the life and death instincts. In a number of works, Freud postulates that human beings are driven by two dominant instincts, one directing the individual towards enjoyment of life and communal life, and one towards aggression and destruction, each of which are symbolized by Eros and Thanatos respectively. The female character in “The Snake” is dominantly controlled by Thanatos as she asks a biologist to sell her a venomous rattlesnake and feed the snake a rat. She satisfies her erotic and aggressive desires by watching the killing act while the male character, a man of Eros by profession and inclination, is appalled both by the act and the woman. Thus, the short story turns out to be a realm of the collision between Eros and Thanatos. When read under this light, the short story, unlike what most readers think, is not mysterious at all.

### Öz

John Steinbeck'in ünlü öyküsü “Yılan”, yazarın bu yönde bir açıklama yaptığı için, amacı ve iletisi bilinmeyen, gizemli bir öykü olarak kabul edilir. Steinbeck öyküde geçen olayın gerçekten de yaşandığını ve kendisinin, olayı sadece olduğu gibi kağıda geçirdiğini söyler. Çoğu okur ve eleştirmen yazarın bu açıklamasını kabul etmektedirler. Ancak, Freud'un bir inceleme yapıldığında öykünün, yaşam ve ölüm dürtülerinin, yani Eros ve Thanatos'un çatışmasını gösteren, iyi düşünülmüş ve iyi işlenmiş bir metin olduğunu görürüz. Dolayısıyla, bu makale önce Freud'un yaşam ve ölüm dürtüleri kuramını açıklamayı, sonra da öyküdeki karakterlerin davranışlarının, bariz bir şekilde yaşam ve ölüm dürtüleriyle yönlendirildiğini göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Freud birden çok eserinde insanların, birisi bireyi hayattan keyif almaya ve birlikte yaşamaya, diğeri saldırganlık ve yıkıma yönlendiren iki baskın dürtü tarafından yönetildiğini ortaya koyar. Bu dürtülerin ilki Eros, ikincisi Thanatos'la sembolize edilmektedir. “Yılan”ın kadın karakteri, zehirli bir çingiraklı yılan satın almak ve yılanın bir fareyi yiyişini seyretmek istediği için özünde Thanatos dürtüsüyle hareket etmektedir. Kadın, yılanın fareyi yeme sahnesini seyrederek erotik ve saldırgan dürtülerini tatmin ederken, bir biyolog olan ve hem işi hem de yaradılışı gereği bir Eros insanı olan erkek karakter, şaşkınlık içinde kadını ve sahneyi seyretmektedir. Böylece öykü Eros ve Thanatos'un çatışma yeri haline gelir. Bu açıdan bakıldığında, çoğu okurun düşüncesinin aksine, öykü açık bir metin haline gelir.

### Introduction

Steinbeck's infamous short story “The Snake” from the collection *The Long Valley* has retained its mystery. According to the author it is based on a real-life event that happened in his marine biologist friend Ed Ricketts' laboratory as he wrote: “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 philosophic intent is. It just happened (1990b, p. 17). Steinbeck's verdict that he does not know what it means fixated the short story as a mysterious text in the history of American fiction. As Charles May reported readers readily accepted the mystery and associated it with the main female character's psychological problems (1973, p. 322). Encouraged by Steinbeck's declaration critics, too, reverberated "the incomprehension of the ... [female character's] behavior" (Weston and Knapp, 1989, p. 94). Leroy Garcia accepts the mysteriousness of the short story claiming that "it is the only story [in *The Long Valley*] which is typified by a sense of ambiguity and even mystery..." (1976, p. 25).

Needless to say, Steinbeck was not a naïve author when he wrote the short story or the log, nor he should believe any material taken directly from life can make a short story proper. Consequently, it is difficult to take his comment as a fact. Steinbeck narrates the incident in the same text as follows:

Very briefly, this is the incident. A woman came in one night wanting to buy a male rattlesnake. 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 snake 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 (1990b, p. 17).

The incident in the laboratory is essentially narrated in the short story but the short story, the artistic work, includes details that go beyond the mere incident. John H. Timmerman, for example, rightly points out that Steinbeck in the least provides the reader with a "particular sensibility by which to observe the events" by using the doctor as a reflector character (1990, p. 201), which eventually implies that the short story includes more than a simple narration of the incident. In a narrower and more precise sense, a Freudian analysis and interpretation of the short story reveals that Steinbeck consciously or otherwise added some other details that render the short story a site of complex relationships between life instinct and death instinct. It effectively depicts the confusion and disorder of mind of a man dictated by life instinct when confronted with a woman who embodies

contrary drives and yet allures the man with her quizzical charm. In other words, Steinbeck elevated the incident into a short story that unfolds an intricate play between Eros and Thanatos which requires Freudian scrutiny.

### **Freud on Eros and Thanatos**

The study of psychoanalysis conceives sexuality and aggression as the strongest human instincts. Thus, it is not surprising that Freud wrote about these instincts in several works extensively. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* dated 1920, he asserts that there are “two kinds of processes ... constantly at work in living substance, operating in contrary directions, one constructive and assimilatory and the other destructive and dissimilatory” (Freud, 1961, p. 34). These are the life instinct and the death instinct. Freud draws a parallel between the life instinct and sexual instincts, and labels them as Eros, saying that “... the libido of our sexual instincts would coincide with the Eros of the poets and philosophers” (1961, p. 43).

Three years later he publishes *The Ego and the Id*, a book he introduces in the Preface as “further development of some trains of thought which I opened up in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*” (1960, p. xii). This time he points out that Eros is markedly easier to detect and study. Eros signifies “the uninhibited sexual instinct proper and the instinctual impulses of an aim-inhibited or sublimated nature derived from it, but also the self-preservative instinct, which must be assigned to the ego” (1960, p. 37). In plain words, Eros embodies the direct uninhibited sexual gratification as well as its indirect forms of expression or its fulfillment in socially acceptable forms without getting harmed by the gratification of the desire or its outcome. Because Eros is the life instinct and is directly related to preservation of life, it cannot afford a mindless pursuit of pleasure. That is why Eros is “assigned to ego” and it is closely related to reality principle as well as pleasure principle.

To further explain the workings of the life instinct Freud argues that “...Eros, by bringing about a more and more far-reaching combination of the particles into which living substance is dispersed, aims at complicating life and at the same time, of course, preserving it” (1960, p. 38). While the idea of preservation of life is relatively easy to understand, the term “complicating life” is obscure. A close look at *Civilization and its Discontents* reveals that Freud uses “complicating life” in a positive sense: Eros is also a relational instinct that bonds people. In this study dated 1930, Freud relates the life and death instincts to the idea of civilization and points out that Eros not only preserves life but also aims to “join ...[life] into even larger units” (1962, p. 65); the purpose of Eros is “to combine single individuals,

and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind” (1962, p. 69). That naturally requires an affinity and identification among the members of the community. Eros “aims at binding the members of the community together in a libidinal way as well and employs every means to that end. It favours every path by which strong identification can be established between the members of the community, and it summons up aim-inhibited libido on the largest scale so as to strengthen the communal bond by relations of friendship” (1962, pp. 55-56). Consequently, Eros represents all those instincts and motives that purport both to enjoy and preserve life not only individualistically but also as a unit of people as large as possible. The individual joy of life and efforts to embellish, enrich and preserve life are related to development of civilization through life instinct, i.e. Eros.

Freud postulates that sexual instincts are “true life instincts. They operate against the purpose of the other instincts, which leads, by reason of their function, to death” (1961, p. 34) and death instincts are “destructive and dissimulatory” (1961, p. 44). The purpose of death instincts is “to lead organic life back into the inanimate state” (1960, p. 38). Simply put, aggressive and destructive instincts are death instincts for Freud, which can be directed towards animate or inanimate beings as well as one self. If the means of directing the aggressiveness outwards are restricted, the subject tends more to resort to self-destruction (1962, p. 66).

The relationship between life and death instinct is quite complicated. To begin with, life and death instincts are not in a binary relationship; one’s existence does not negate the other’s existence. On the contrary, they co-exist. Furthermore, all instincts fall under either one of the two categories. In Freud’s words, “... the two kinds of instincts seldom -perhaps never- appear in isolation from each other, but are alloyed with each other in varying and very different proportions and so become unrecognizable to our judgement” (1962, p. 66). In that respect, all individuals have those two instincts and are dominated and directed by the one or the other or both in a given moment. Freud does not further delve into manifestations of the life and death instincts in detail, at least in the stated works. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, he points to sadism and masochism as examples of the death instinct (1962, p. 66) whereas he suffices to write that “the man who is predominantly erotic will give first preference to his emotional relationships to other people” (1962, p. 30) which implies that people dominated by death instinct are isolated and aggressive. One further complexity is that “...a portion of the [death] instinct is diverted

towards the external world and comes to light as an instinct of aggressiveness and destructiveness. In this way the instinct itself be pressed into the service of Eros, in that the organism was destroying some other thing, whether animate or inanimate, instead of destroying its own self" (1962, p. 66). The fact pointed out by Freud illustrates that indirect satisfaction of death instincts protect people from the direct means of the death drive and thus provides for preservation of life. Though much less important, there is a final complexity to be addressed: Freud names the life instinct and calls it Eros but he does not adorn the death instinct with a mythological name though he has a penchant for viewing mythology as one element of "the criteria for providing proof or guaranteeing objectivity in knowledge of the unconscious" (Anzieu quoted in Smadja, 2019, p. 18). People of the field writing after Freud suggested *mortido*, *destrudo* and *Thanatos* to accompany Eros. Paul Federn, for example, proposes the term *mortido* (1952, p. 324) but does not shy away from using *Thanatos* (1952, p. 272) as well in his book *Ego Psychology and Psychoses*. Eric Berne, too, prefers *mortido* (1968, p. 1968). Following Herbert Marcuse's example, I will opt for *Thanatos* as, being another mythological figure, *Thanatos* forms a better company for Eros.

### **The Snake**

The titular reptile is a very popular symbol across the cultures in religious and secular contexts. Snake symbolism "is present in the art and mythology of nearly all of Earth's cultures, figuring prominently in European, Egyptian, Near Eastern, Asian, African, Australian, and North and South American cultural artifacts" and it is "associated with the ideas of wisdom, and knowledge; healing and renewal; life and fertility; immortality and time; chaos and creation; and evil, sin, and death, among others" (Dailey, 2020, p. 1). *Dictionary of Symbolism: Cultural Items and Meanings behind Them* also underlines its popularity across the cultures and the ambiguous associations it has: the snake is mostly linked to the underworld in ancient cultures but today it has "such remarkable natural associations with life and death that it plays a significant role in most cultural traditions" (Biederman, 1992, p. 310).

The variety and ambiguity in the symbolic meaning of the snake is not a peculiarity only pertaining to it. Symbols in general do not present themselves as single, definite, and fixed monologic constructs. They can change in time, or depending on the context a single symbol may mean very different things. Water, for example, may signify life as life started in water and, it is indispensable to

growth of plants and procreation depends on bodily fluids. Yet, water also drowns people and ends life. Open sea is a threat for survivors of a shipwreck while for someone standing on the shore the sea line in the horizon implies freedom and the source of infinite possibilities. Robert Frost poem “Neither Far Out, Nor Deep” presents a good example in this respect. Frost contrasts the land and the sea and presents the sea as a symbol of people’s narrow-mindedness and ignorance as people on the shore never bother to look at the land to search for truth and keep looking at the sea hypnotically. Consequently, a symbol should be scrutinized in the very specific context the poem, or the short story builds for us.

The snake is a polysemic symbol when it is approached through the complex relationship of Eros and Thanatos. Being venomous, it infers death. In a larger scale, in Christianity and Judaism, it is believed to be the cause of fall of human beings: due to it, Adam and Eve and their lineage become mortal. In the context of the short story, it is certainly in the confines of Thanatos due to its general nature and the woman’s wish to watch it eat a rat. It represents the woman’s satisfaction of sadistic drives.

However, as a phallic entity it unquestionably implies sexuality, a task which is ascribed to Eros. The snake has the power to shred its skin, and thus is also in the service of Eros. In the religious context, it introduces the human beings with not only death but also the carnal knowledge. Thus, ironically, it symbolizes both birth and death. The same relationship is viable in the specific context of the story as well: the snake kills the rat but at the same time incorporates the rat into itself, which implies sexuality. The fact that the woman gets sexual satisfaction from watching the snake eating the rat further emphasizes the polysemantic nature the symbol of snake which renders the snake a very apt image for the collision of Eros and Thanatos.

### **The Woman**

Although Freud does not illustrate the forms and behavioral patterns of Eros and Thanatos in particular, we can safely state that the unnamed woman primarily represents death instinct. The woman appears at the door of the laboratory one evening with the desire to buy a male rattle snake. Having snakes as pets does not necessarily indicate an anomaly or perversion considering numerous people keeping snakes as pets. However, compared to other pets such as cats and rabbits, snake is definitely much more of a dangerous choice as a pet. Since self-preservation is assigned to life instinct and reality principle, owning a pet-snake

can be regarded as an expression and extension of the death instinct. The woman not only wants to buy a snake, but she also does not hesitate to put her hand in the cage of the rattlesnakes to reach to her snake. Disregarding the danger the rattlesnakes pose is a sign of her lower life instinct. Luckily the doctor saves her in the last minute from being bitten. Her destructive instinct is further underlined when she does not want the doctor to extract the venom of the rattle snake and she wants to watch the snake kill and eat a rat. Thus, while her desire to own a snake denotes a self-destructive tendency of Thanatos, the desire to watch the snake eat the rat is a prime example of sadism.

After Dr. Phillips warns her about the possibility of being bitten by the snake, she demands the snake be kept in the lab. Even though the doctor tells her that she does not have to buy the snake and she can come and see and feed the snake whenever she wants, she persists to own the snake. She wants the snake to be her own. This is a clear sign of her identification with the snake.

Her identification with the snake is made most manifest when the doctor drops the mouse in the snake's cage. While the doctor watches the rat, he feels the woman sigh though he is not sure. But "...out of the corner of his eye he ...[sees] her body crouch and stiffen" (Steinbeck, 1990a, p. 58) as if she is prepared for her prey. Approaching the rat, the snake weaves his head "...slowly back and forth, aiming, getting distance, aiming" (1990a, p. 59). This time the doctor directly looks at the woman and turns "sick" since the woman weaves, "too, not much, just a suggestion" (1990a, p. 59). As the snake kills the rat, the narrator of the story openly announces: "The woman relaxed, relaxed sleepily" (1990a, p. 59) suggesting that she derives an erotic pleasure from watching the scene. The snake waits for a while after killing the rat to make sure that the rat is dead. When convinced, the snake opens his mouth and starts to swallow it. Now the doctor has to prevent himself from looking at the woman lest she also opens her mouth. He thinks to himself: "If she's opening her mouth, I'll be sick. I'll be afraid" (1990a, p. 60).

His last reaction -getting sick and being afraid- shows that he is actively resisting to the death drive, which the woman now openly exhibits through her involuntary mimicking of the snake. The doctor, who is also attracted to the woman, reacts to woman's identification with the snake through a denial. The similarity between the snake and the woman, already hinted by the narrator at the beginning of the short story, only now becomes evident to the doctor. When the doctor enters his laboratory at the beginning of the story, the narrator directs the

reader's attention to white rats, captive cats, his wet sack which include the starfish he collected, and the glass cages inhabited by the rattlesnakes. Then the narrator focuses on the rattlesnakes whose "dusty eyes seemed to look at nothing" (1990a, p. 50). After the woman enters the story, one of the first things the doctor sees about her is her eyes that do not "seem to see him" (1990a, p. 53), just like the eyes of the snakes. The same eyes later "seemed veiled with dust" (1990a, p. 54). Though her eyes shine bright under strong light, her body is at complete rest, "almost in a state of suspended animation" (1990a, p. 53). Being a man of science and a biologist, the doctor is quick to diagnose her state: "Low metabolic rate, almost as low as a frog's" (1990a, p. 53). The doctor does not associate her with snakes though snakes, too, have low metabolic rate. Her "state of suspended animation" (1990a, p. 53) continues even when the doctor produces a dead cat out from a small gas chamber and dissects it, an action that normally upsets people according to the doctor. Being primarily under the influence of Thanatos, the woman is not revolted or moved by the sight of a dead cat being dissected and keeps her calm just like a snake would do.

Most short stories involve a recognition or transformation for the main characters. The woman in the short story is exempt from this generalization as she leaves the short story unchanged; comforted and satisfied for the moment but completely unchanged. She is basically dominated by Thanatos but due to forces of civilization and collective life, she looks for indirect means of satisfying her death instinct. "Since the primitive creative and destructive urges themselves cannot be basically changed, growth or change in the human personality takes place by changing the manner in which these tensions are relieved" (Berne, 1968, s. 78). Consequently, the only change she can achieve throughout the story is satisfying her destructive instinct with a substitute for her death instinct. Change, growth or recognition is left for the doctor to experience.

### **The Doctor**

Doctor Phillips, unlike his counterpart, is a man with a strong predilection for Eros. Being in the service of humanity, his job is already in the realm of Eros. His laboratory is also his house, which may symbolize his dedication to his job. Yet, he is not an isolated mad scientist secluded in his laboratory. He is well-integrated into the society as he is never short of visitors even though he does not like being interrupted while working. Using Freud's words, he has managed to join his life



“into ... larger units” (1962, p. 65) and seems to be doing fine until he is interrupted by the mysterious woman.

His Eros instinct is openly signaled through the starfish for the first time. When the woman appears at his door, he is about to start his work with the starfish, which introduces the theme of sexuality into the short story. The doctor does not like being interrupted or asked questions by visitors, but he is quite talkative with the woman. Though he does not need to speak with the woman who says, “I’ll be quiet until you can talk to me” (1990a, p. 52), not waiting for any prompt or encouragement, he gives a detailed account of what he is doing:

“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 some 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 on microscope slides for biologic study” (1990a, pp. 52-53).

The subject of his rather long explanation is neither a usual nor a proper subject of conversation with a total stranger in the early 1930s, the time Steinbeck wrote the short story.

That piece of monologue both introduces the theme of sexuality and communicates the doctor’s tendency of Eros. It is true that the doctor kills the starfish and the cat as well and instincts associated with Thanatos are often expressed indirectly due to suppression of civilization. Furthermore, Eric Berne draws attention to surgery as “one of the most useful sublimations of” Thanatos (1968, p. 72). However, Doctor Phillips reveals his detestation of aggression and violence in a number of instances. Unlike the woman’s desire to see a snake eat a rat, his motivation in killing the cat and the starfish is completely scientific, not associated with pleasure. Moreover, he displays a loving attitude even to the cat he is about to kill in a gas chamber. He picks the cat “gently” and strokes her before dropping her into the gas chamber. While the cat dies there, he feeds the other cats. One of the cats rubs her neck against his hand on which he smiles and pets her neck. Therefore, his killing the cat or the starfish harbors no death instincts. On the contrary, he gets angry with the woman when she asks him to drop a rat in the

snake's cage. He feels the woman's demand to be "profoundly wrong" and "deeply sinful" (1990a, p. 57). As the narrator conveys "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" (1990a, p. 56). Under the light of the narrator's explanation, we should expect him to turn the woman out of his laboratory. However, his erotic interest in the woman prevents him from doing so. The same interest also prevents him from recognizing that she is the embodiment of Thanatos.

The reader's recognition of the affinity between the woman and the snake is much earlier than that of the doctor simply because the doctor's sexual affliction with the woman gets in the way of his view. Neither the narrator nor the doctor is very articulate in Steinbeck's construction of the short story. The temptation of the doctor is not voiced openly at all; it is implied through the doctor's atypical over-enthusiastic conversation with her. Normally he has "... little routines of explanations... he could say without thinking" (1990a, p. 52). The woman is not described in detail and her eventual charm on the doctor is not expanded on at all. When she first appears at the door, the doctor is most away from being charmed; on the contrary, hearing the knock on the door, he wears "...a slight grimace of annoyance" (1990a, p. 52). As she states her wish to talk to him, he tries not to let her in but she "slips in" (1990a, p. 52) anyway. She gets his attention only when she rejects his invitation to look at the slides through the microscope. This is something the visitors of the laboratory love: "People always wanted to look through the glass.... Although answering questions [of people] bored him, a lack of interest in what he was doing irritated him. A desire to arouse her grew in him" (1990a, p. 53). As a person of science and Eros, his desire to arouse her is neither understandable nor acceptable for the doctor. For that reason, he is totally out of countenance in the face of this complex situation.

The doctor has dropped rats in snakes' cages countless of times for other people to see or to feed the snakes. He is accustomed to having visitors and feeding snakes for them. However, this time "...[f]or some reason he was sorry for the rat, and such a feeling had never come to him before" (1990a, pp. 57-58). A few minutes ago, he presents to the woman the snakes' process of eating the rat in a detached manner: "I see. You want to watch how rattlesnakes eat. All right. I'll show you. It's better than a bullfight if you look it at one way, and it's simply a snake eating his dinner if you look at it another" (1990a, p. 56). However, on seeing the woman open

the snake cage and extend an arm into it and calmly ask him to feed the snake, he realizes the extent of Thanatos in her personality:

Dr. Phillips was shaken. He found that he was avoiding the dark eyes that did not seem to look at anything. He felt it was profoundly wrong to put a rat into the cage, deeply sinful; and he didn't know why. Often he had put rats in the cage when someone or other had wanted to see it, but this desire tonight sickened him (1990a, p. 57).

Dr. Phillip's total confusion over the matter unsettles him and tries to explain the situation to himself though he addresses the woman:

"It's a good thing to see," he said. It shows you how a snake can work. It makes you have a respect for the rattlesnake. Then, too, lots of people have dreams about the terror of snakes making the kill. I think because it is a subjective rat. The person is the rat. Once you see it the whole matter is objective. The rat is only a rat and the terror is removed" (1990a, p. 57).

Doctor Phillips feels sorry for the rat regardless and the narrator then points out that "... such a feeling had never come to him before" (1990a, p. 58).

The feeling comes then because the doctor now identifies himself with the rat for the first time in the presence of the woman who he identifies with the snake. The recognition shatters him so much that the silence of the room bothers him; he feels as if his blood was driven and to break the silence, he "loudly" says: "It's the most beautiful thing in the world.'... His veins were throbbing. 'It's the most terrible thing in the world" (1990a, p. 59).

It is the most beautiful thing because the snake eating the rat symbolizes the sexual unification of the doctor and the woman, which the doctor yearns for. The snake might be a phallic symbol, but at the same time, it swallows the rat, incorporating it into himself. Thus, as the snake swallows the rat, it acts in a "constructive and assimilatory" manner, rather than "dissimilatory" (Freud, 1961, p. 43). In the same context, snake's act of eating the rat turns into an atrocity because it symbolizes Eros falling prey to Thanatos. Simultaneously, the doctor gives in to his guilty pleasure and gives up his life-preservative instinct. For that reason, the doctor cannot experience the comfort the woman experiences out of the scene. As Freud states "we have all experienced how the greatest pleasure attainable by us, that of the sexual act, is associated with a momentary extinction of a highly intensified excitation. The binding of an instinctual impulse would be

preliminary function designed to prepare the excitation for its final elimination in the pleasure of discharge” (1961, p. 56). The doctor’s excitement continues even after the snake eats the rat. He offers coffee to the mysterious woman to prolong her stay but she simply refuses the offer. Her eyes go out of “their dusty dream for a moment” (1990a, p. 61) and she slides out of the laboratory quietly.

The doctor’s excitement is not without perplexity. Talking to himself, he tries to solve out his confusion once again: “I’ve read so much about psychological sex symbols... It does not seem to explain. Maybe I’m too much alone. Maybe I should kill the snake. If I knew- no, I can’t pray to anything” (1990a, p. 61). He can find comfort neither in science nor religion; being a man of Eros he cannot kill the snake, which would mean a symbolical killing and getting rid of the idea of the woman. He does not want to get rid of the woman; on the contrary, he waits for her return “for weeks. ... For months” (p. 61) he looks for her in vain.

### **Conclusion**

The incident “The Snake” is based on is a mysterious event; anyone experiencing it would be confused and astonished as Steinbeck was. He had difficulty grappling with it as we can see in his unpublished notes accompanying his manuscript. He writes,

The story of the snake must be written. I don’t know what it means but it means something very terrible to my unconscious. And I’ll write it slowly out of my unconscious. It’s a terrible story. It’s a damnable story. I don’t know what it means. I don’t know. I’ll write the frightful thing though . . . Carol disapproves of it on the grounds that it is horror for its own sake. I don’t think that is the case at all. And it does have to be written. It would eat me up otherwise (Federle, 2015).

The incident did not eat up Steinbeck. The short story, in its ultimate form, is a product of an experienced writer whose mind is accustomed to writing to a degree he may not be aware of. Looked into carefully, the short story itself is not mysterious at all. It perfectly illustrates the collision of Eros and Thanatos personified by the doctor and the unnamed woman. The doctor, the man of Eros and science, falls into total chaos and feels helpless in the face of the fact that he is attracted to a woman who is very much against his instincts and principles in life. In that respect, Charles May is right to say that this short story is about “the inadequacy of scientific knowledge” (1973, p. 323).

The motives and the drives of both characters are indeed quite obvious. What makes the short story look mysterious is the author's employment of a detached narrator as he does in most of his short stories such as "The Chrysanthemums," "The Vigilante," and "The Murder." Readers who want everything to be explained and illustrated in short stories probably deem these stories mysterious as well. Likewise, Leroy Garcia believes the story is "not self-contained, which does not provide within its borders an answer to every question it raises" (1976, p. 25). However, the short story presents us with obscurity, not total solipsism. Utilizing the correct method, obscurity can be made sense of. As Freud writes "...the analyzing physician could do no more than discover the unconscious material that was concealed from the patient, put it together, and, at the right moment, communicate it to him. Psychoanalysis was then first and foremost an art of interpreting" (1961, p. 12). It is my belief that when the short story is approached from a Freudian point of view employing the life and death drives, we can easily interpret the short story and the mystery hovering above it is dissipated.

The same approach likewise demonstrates that Steinbeck's short story is way beyond a mere narration of events he chanced to witness. Manifestations of elements and symbols of Eros and Thanatos scattered through the narration cannot simply be the result of a happy coincidence. The firm symbolic texture of the short story surely does not take part in the famous incident in Ed Ricketts' laboratory. In short, "The Snake" is a very well-thought and crafted short story and there is nothing mysterious about it except for Steinbeck's statement "I wrote it just as it happened."

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### Summary

Steinbeck's short story "The Snake" from the collection *The Long Valley*, according to the author, is based on a real-life event that took place in his marine biologist friend Ed Ricketts' laboratory and he wrote the short story as it happened: "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 philosophic intent is. It just happened (1990, p. 17). Steinbeck's verdict that he does not know what it means earned the short story a mysterious status in the history of American fiction. Most readers and critics have readily accepted the author's claim. Yet, Steinbeck was not a naïve author when he wrote the short story, nor he believed any

material taken directly from life can make a short story proper. Consequently, it is difficult to take his comment as a fact. A Freudian analysis and interpretation of the short story reveals that Steinbeck consciously or otherwise added some other details that render the short story a site of complex relationships between life instinct and death instinct. It actually depicts the confusion and disorder of mind of a man dictated by life instinct when confronted with a woman embodying contrary drives who allures the man with her quizzical charm.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud asserts that there are “two kinds of processes ... constantly at work in living substance, operating in contrary directions, one constructive and assimilatory and the other destructive and dissimilatory” (1961, p. 34). These are the life instinct and the death instinct. Freud draws a parallel between life instinct and sexual instincts and puts them in Eros saying that “... the libido of our sexual instincts would coincide with the Eros of the poets and philosophers” (1961, p. 43). Eros signifies “the uninhibited sexual instinct proper and the instinctual impulses of an aim-inhibited or sublimated nature derived from it, but also the self-preservative instinct, which must be assigned to the ego” (1961, p. 37). In plain words, Eros embodies the direct uninhibited sexual gratification as well as its indirect forms of expression or its fulfillment in socially acceptable forms without getting harmed by the gratification of the desire or its outcome.

Freud postulates that death instincts are “destructive and dissimilatory” (1961, p. 44). The purpose of death instincts is “to lead organic life back into the inanimate state” (1960, p. 38). Simply put, aggressive and destructive instincts are death instincts for Freud. The aggressive and destructive tendencies attributed to human beings’ death instinct can be directed towards animate or inanimate beings as well as oneself. If the means of directing the aggressiveness outwards are restricted, the subject tends more to resort to self-destruction (1962, p. 66).

The titular reptile is a very popular symbol across the cultures in religious and secular contexts. Snake is “associated with the ideas of wisdom, and knowledge; healing and renewal; life and fertility; immortality and time; chaos and creation; and evil, sin, and death, among others” (Dailey, 2020, p.1). The snake is a polysemic symbol when it is approached through the complex relationship of Eros and Thanatos. Being venomous, it infers death. In a larger scale, in the Christianity and Judaism it is believed to be the cause of fall of human beings: due to it, Adam and Eve and their lineage become mortal. In the context of the short story, it is certainly in the confines of Thanatos due to its general nature and the woman’s wish to watch it eat a rat. It represents the woman’s satisfaction of sadistic drives. However, as a phallic entity it unquestionably implies sexuality which is ascribed to the task of Eros. The snake is also in the service of Eros through its power of shredding its skin.

The unnamed woman of the story dominantly represents death instinct for several reasons. She wants to buy a rattlesnake, and watch it kill and eat a rat. While watching the snake eat the rat, the woman’s body movements denote that she identifies herself with the snake and gets an erotic pleasure from the scene. She is already described in close affinity with a snake. Consequently, as she satisfies her erotic and aggressive desires, Eros and Thanatos collide in her existence.

A similar collision happens in the doctor’s case, too. The doctor’s experiments on the starfish contrast with his killing of the cat as the first action implies Eros and the second Thanatos. However, he hates violence and admits that he kills only for science. He recognizes the dominant Thanatos impulse in the woman, but this does not prevent him from being attracted to her. This leads the doctor to a confusion because he is primarily dictated by Eros as his profession and constitution demonstrates.

When the characters’ tendency towards Eros and Thanatos is detected and the short story is read accordingly, we can see a well-crafted short story that is quite overt and away from being mysterious.