

John Steinbeck's "The Snake"  
A Textual Study

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John Steinbeck wrote "The Snake" in the summer of 1934 after witnessing an incident in Ed Ricketts's Cannery Row laboratory which he describes sixteen years later in his memorial essay, "About Ed Ricketts."

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. 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 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. What happened or why I have no idea. Whether the woman was driven by a sexual, a religious, a zoophilic, or a gustatory impulse we never could figure. 1

A second account of this incident can be found in Martha Heasley Cox's interview with Webster F. Street, who was present in Ricketts's laboratory on that day. <sup>2</sup> According to Street, the strange dark woman was "just a girl that was on the circuit," who "took a fancy to Ed." Like the lady of Steinbeck's story, this girl watched in fascination as the snake stalked and devoured the white rat, but unlike the fictional woman, she did not purchase the snake or the rat. Significantly, in Street's account, it was a scientist and not the woman who decided to feed the snake.

Several times in "About Ed Ricketts," Steinbeck insisted that he wrote the story "just as it happened," but whether such factual, objective reportage is probable, or indeed possible in a writer as imaginative as John Steinbeck, is highly questionable. The degree to which Steinbeck altered this incident in writing "The Snake" is, in fact, significant. Through a careful analysis of the textual variants between the version published in *The Long Valley* and the recently acquired handwritten text located at the Steinbeck Research Center of the San Jose State

University, one may discern Steinbeck's writing method at work, transforming source materials into a unique product of his individual creativity.

"The Snake" was first published in the June, 1935, issue of *The Monterey Beacon*, a small experimental literary magazine run in conjunction with horse stables. In payment for his story, Steinbeck received six month's use of a steeplechase horse named Cochise. The editor of *The Monterey Beacon* noted this "horse trade," at the head of the story, and in his letter of July 30, 1935, to Mavis McIntosh, Steinbeck notified his agent of the deal and offered her "ten percent of six month's riding . . ."<sup>3</sup>

In February 1938, *Esquire* published the story under the title "A Snake of One's Own," preserving, for the most part, the text of the earlier publication. Later that same year, Viking published its most popular version under its original title in *The Long Valley*. Although the textual variants between these three published versions are almost entirely accidental, many substantive variants are apparent between any of these texts and the handwritten manuscript. This manuscript is contained in a hardbound, ledger type notebook measuring 7 ¼ inches by 11 ¾ inches, on yellowing seven column paper, containing thirty-seven lines per page. Steinbeck, in his characteristically legible but minute hand, filled five pages from top to bottom, including both margins, in writing "The Snake."<sup>4</sup>

The plot of "The Snake" remained notably constant throughout its composition and publication, following for the most part Steinbeck's account of the incident in "About Ed Ricketts." Young Dr. Phillips, who has "the mild, preoccupied eyes of one who looks through a microscope a great deal," returns to his "little commercial laboratory on the cannery street of Monterey," after a day of collecting starfish. While busily engaged in two types of activity, preparing dead specimens (the cat and starfish zygotes) and feeding live ones (including himself), he is interrupted by a knock on the door. A mysterious, tall woman with black eyes and a "soft, throaty" voice enters and sits motionless while the doctor continues his scientific procedures. Her apparent lack of interest irritates him, and in an effort to shock her into attention, he allows her to watch as he slits the dead cat's throat and drains its blood. This has no effect on the woman who calmly asks to purchase a

male rattlesnake. She demands that the snake be fed, compelling the now frightened and confused doctor to place a white rat into the snake's feeding cage. The woman dispassionately watches the kill while the scientist hysterically cries, "It's the most beautiful thing in the world. . . it's the most terrible thing in the world." He glances at the entranced woman and sees that she is weaving like the attacking snake, "not much, just a suggestion." After the snake's jaws completely engulf the rat, the now relaxed woman leaves the emotionally exhausted doctor to "comb out his thoughts" and try to make sense out of his irrational terror. He is unable to do this, however, for all theories about "psychological sex symbols" do not seem adequate. He never sees the woman again.

Steinbeck's creative process was one of internalizing and personalizing the events and personalities surrounding him; thus, the incident described in a vastly more matter-of-fact way by Webster Street, became something deeply mysterious in Steinbeck's fictive mind. In his unpublished working notes preceding the handwritten draft of "The Snake," Steinbeck wrote:

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.<sup>5</sup>

The most significant substantive variants between the manuscript and the published versions deal with the development of the scientist's and the woman's characters, and the psychologically devastating effect on the doctor of their momentary encounter. Changes apparent from the manuscript to the published text serve to emphasize Steinbeck's intent to show the doctor as a logician who loses his scientific aloofness when confronted with unreasoning, demonic vitality.

In the earlier part of the story, Steinbeck carefully deleted from the final text emotionally charged phrases describing the doctor's actions. When, for example, the young man was interrupted by a knock on the door, his reaction in both the manuscript and published versions was a "grimace of annoyance," but in the

manuscript Steinbeck allowed the young man an additional show of displeasure when he “walked to the door and threw it open.” In the published text this act is not so violent; he simply goes “to open” the door. In both then manuscript and *The Long Valley*, evidence of the doctor’s unemotional, objective manner is abundant. He simultaneously feeds the mewling cats while calmly gassing one of them in the “killing chamber.” Steinbeck removed all emotional references from the published versions when describing the scientist’s quarters; even the laboratory work light, a “painful white light” in the manuscript, becomes a more neutral “pouring white light” in the published text. With the introduction of the woman, however, the scientist moves toward a greater emotionalism, a movement clearly seen in Steinbeck’s revisions. In the manuscript Dr. Phillips “felt it was wrong to do the ting, but he didn’t know why.” In the revised text, however, Steinbeck introduced the subjective element of sin and guilt into the doctor’s consciousness:

He felt that it was profoundly wrong to put a rat into the cage, deeply sinful, and he didn’t know why.

In response to his growing fear, Dr. Phillips attempts to form a rational construct to conceal his terror. The explanation in the manuscript clearly reveals both the source of his fear and his emotional, spiritual hope for deliverance:

Lots of people have dreams about the terror of snakes making the kill; I think it’s because it is a subjective rat. The rat is a persona. Once you see this trough, the rat is only a rat and you are free from the terror.

In the revised text, Steinbeck extended this passage in order to decrease the doctor’s lucidity; the young man speaks an additional sixteen words about the instructive value of seeing “how a snake can work,” thus concealing the irrational core of fear, that he will become the rat, as a casual after-thought. Likewise, his intense desire is altered from spiritual freedom to the scientifically predictable result of an educational process in which, “Once you see it the whole matter is objective. The rat is only a rat and the terror is removed.” This revision prepares the reader for the contrapuntal effect of the scientist’s fall from his delicate structure of logic into a dark abyss of chaotic fear. Steinbeck heightened this fall through other revisions of the handwritten draft. In the manuscript he wrote, “It’s the most beautiful thing in

the world,' the young man cried. His veins were throbbing." In the published text the added words, "It's the most terrible thing in the world," bring an even greater passion to the scientist's formerly objective perception.

Unlike Dr. Phillips, the woman remains consistently two dimensional throughout the story, all revisions from the manuscript to the published text serving to strengthen her symbolic force by depersonalizing and flattening her character. The woman seems sensually motivated in Steinbeck's handwritten draft, but the key descriptive words giving her the air of sexual intensity were consistently deleted from the published version. In the manuscript, for example, her eyes "glittered with controlled excitement," but in the published version her eyes simply "glittered in the strong light." Later in the manuscript, Steinbeck used the adjective "feverish" to describe her eyes, a word conspicuously absent from the finished text. While the woman certainly displays a curious sympathy for the snake, her perverse emotions are never revealed by Steinbeck's choice of descriptive wording; she remains throughout a faceless mystery. Her presence can be seen to derive from the dynamic interaction of Dr. Phillips's logical function as a scientist and his emotional, poetic function as a human being. She is a force rising simultaneously from man's unconscious and from the sea. The fact that she is perceived as an evil or threatening force is a result of the young man's refusal to acknowledge that dark, chaotic part of himself.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting that Steinbeck noted this same internal contradiction in Ed Ricketts:

I have said that his mind had no horizons, but that is untrue. He forbade his mind to think of metaphysical or extraphysical matters, and his mind refused to obey him.<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Phillips's movement from an illusionary, rational calm to illogical terror is understandable. Far from being a moral contest between two distinct individuals, culminating in the young man's seduction, the process can rather be seen as the psychic rebellion of the doctor's unconscious. His terror comes from his refusal to accept the poetic, religious aspect of life.

Steinbeck's revision of the story's end forcefully indicates its mythic basis. In the manuscript, when the doctor tries to comb out his thoughts after the woman has gone, he contemplates prayer:

He thought of his life and grinned. "Mother Biology, save me from this evil," he said. "Holy Science! protect me."

The satirical tone of this passage demonstrates backsliding by Dr. Phillips, an attempt, through sarcasm, to dismiss the intrusion of the mythic as a ludicrous, bizarre joke. Steinbeck deleted this passage from his final text because it was inconsistent with the depth of the source and significance of the story. Unable to dismiss poetic reality through either logic or ridicule, the scientist remains terrified and baffled by this strange encounter.

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<sup>2</sup> Webster F. Street, "Remembering John Steinbeck," an interview conducted by Martha Heasley Cox (*San Jose Studies*, 1: November 1975), p. 121.

<sup>3</sup> John Steinbeck, *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, ed. Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallstein (New York: The Viking Press, 1975), p. 114.

<sup>4</sup> Also included in this workbook are drafts for chapters of *Of Mice and Men*, *In Dubious Battle*, several unfinished stories, pages of informative, fascinating working notes, as well as drafts for most of the stories in *The Long Valley*.

<sup>5</sup> John Steinbeck, workbook manuscript located at Steinbeck Research Center, San Jose State University Library, p. 128.

<sup>6</sup> Critics have expressed widely divergent views on the interaction between Dr. Phillips and his strange visitor; Warren French, in *John Steinbeck* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962), p. 82, described the story's dominant theme as the conflict between scientific rationalism and passionate irrationality, identifying the scientist as one who, with Steinbeck's approval, controls irrational drives in order to "seek knowledge of the world" in which he lives; Reloy Garcia, in "Steinbeck's 'The Snake': An Explication" (*Steinbeck Quarterly*, 5: Summer-Fall, 1972), pp. 85-90, saw an Edenic allegory in the short story, with the mysterious woman as a corrupting Eve, and the morally pure, but naïve Dr. Phillips as a scientist-Adam figure; perhaps one of the most perceptive articles on this story is Charles May's "Myth and Mystery in Steinbeck's 'The Snake': A Jungian View" (*Criticism*, 15: Fall, 1973), pp. 322-25, where the woman is seen as the embodiment of a mythic force arising from the

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racial memory of the scientist; May concluded that the story's essential theme is the "inadequacy of scientific knowledge in the face of poetic reality.

<sup>7</sup> John Steinbeck, "About Ed Ricketts," p. xxiv.