

This cannot be explained solely on the basis of the existence of dangerous species. Other forces are at work. An analysis of the reasons given for hating these forms reveals that snakes are disliked because they are 'slimy and dirty' and spiders are repulsive because they are 'hairy and creepy'. This must mean either that they have a strong symbolic significance of some kind, or alternatively that we have a powerful inborn response to avoid these animals.

The snake has long been thought of as a phallic symbol. Being a poisonous phallus, it has represented unwelcome sex, which may be a partial explanation for its unpopularity; but there is more to it than this. If we examine the different levels of snake hatred in children between the ages of four and fourteen, it emerges that the peak of unpopularity comes early, long before puberty is reached. Even at four, the hate level is high-around 30 per cent-and it then climbs slightly, reaching its peak at age six. From then on it shows a smooth decline, sinking to well below 10 per cent by the age of fourteen. There is little difference between the sexes, although at each age level the response from girls is slightly stronger than the response from boys. The arrival of puberty appears to have no impact on the response in either sex.

From this evidence it is difficult to accept the snake simply as a strong sexual symbol. It seems more likely that we are dealing here with an inborn aversion response of our species towards snake-like forms. This would explain not only the early maturation of the reaction, but also the enormously high level of the response when compared with all other animal hates and loves. It would also fit with what we know of our closest living relatives, the chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans. These animals also exhibit a great fear of snakes and here again it matures early. It is not seen in the very young apes, but is fully developed by the time they are a few years old and have reached the stage where they are beginning to make brief sorties away from the security of their mothers' bodies. For them an aversion response clearly has an important survival value and would 'also have been a great benefit to our early ancestors. Despite this, it has been 205