

THE PLUMED SERPENT: KATE'S "RITES OF PASSAGE" TO DEGRADATION

D. H. Lawrence's arrival in Taos, on the 18th of September 1922, marked the beginning of an experience in which he sought "the means to personal and artistic regeneration for himself and religious, political, and cultural regeneration for society".¹ Lawrence had left Europe in dismay and disgust. The politicians, he felt, had set Europe on the path to destruction. Their ineptitude had led to the watershed of the First World war, and the inevitable loss of life had made Europe a spiritual desert, a cultural wasteland. At one point Lawrence had felt that something could be salvaged in Europe through his "Rananim," a remote colony for himself and a few followers a fertile field which would nourish new life; as J.D. Clark points out, however, Lawrence "wavered in this place, and such followers as he had, were as half-hearted as their leader was inconsistent".² "Rananim," therefore, was never secured, and Lawrence was forced to look to America for artistic and spiritual regeneration.

Towards the end of the war, he had to face other disquieting ordeals. He was accused of being a spy and practically hounded out of Cornwall. Soon after, his novel, *The Rainbow*, was suppressed. This only strengthened his conviction that Europe was at the end of a falling, and America at the beginning of a rising, cycle of civilization. He declares in a letter to Harriet Munro, on the 26th of October 1915:

I must see America: here the autumn of all life has set in, the fall: we are hardly more than the ghosts in the haze, we who stand apart from the flux of death. I must see America. I think one can feel hope there. I think that there the life comes up from the roots, crude, but vital. Here, the whole tree of life is dying. It is like being dead: the underworld. I must see America. I believe it is beginning, not ending.³

It is this same revulsion for Europe and hope for a new beginning that Kate, his chief character in *The Plumed Serpent*, brings to Mexico. In Europe, she had felt the "*consumatum est* of her own spirit"⁴ and she sought regeneration in this "new" continent. The purpose of this essay is to define the nature of the regeneration that Kate sought and to discover whether this was attained. Although Lawrence would have us believe that the adventure brought her a degree of self-knowledge, in reality, this maturity is never achieved. In his anxiety to articulate the leadership theme,

1. James C. Cowan, *D. H. Lawrence's American Journey: A Study in Myth and Literature*. Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press (1970) p. 1.
2. J.D. Clark, *The Dark Night of the Body: D.H. Lawrence's 'The Plumed Serpent'*. Austin, Texas: University of Austin Press (1964) p. 5.
3. D.H. Lawrence, quoted in Cowan *op. cit.* p. 3-4.
4. D.H. Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, (1983) p. 82.

Lawrence fails to realize Kate's potential as a character. Thus, what is maturity to Lawrence, seems nothing more than a return to "primitivism" to the reader.⁵

Kate is portrayed in the first few chapters as a combination of an Ursula Brangwen and Winifred Inger. She is an independent and emancipated woman of the world, yet tired of her aimless freedom and, in Mexico, ready to find a new basis for living. However, what she discovers initially is decadence in every sphere of activity. The opening chapters of *The Plumed Serpent* are an unrelenting and unqualified criticism of Mexico. John B. Vickery points out that

Lawrence's novel juxtaposes past and present, moves from the satiric to the mythic mode of expression, progresses from despair and frustration to a tremulous hope, and attempts to discover the religious sense of the past, in order to ensure its revival in the present.⁶

In this initial section of the novel, however, the themes of "revival" and "hope" are in abeyance. Mexico is a place of "death," made squalid and vulgar without even the "passion of its own mystery".⁷ All these ills surface in the bullfight which is a "synecdoche for the whole of Mexico city and, indeed, for all the post revolutionary Mexico that tries to modernise itself".⁸ In the hands of a lesser artist, this event would have become mere documentary or decoration; Lawrence, however, plays on the readers' expectations and gives them something more. Daleski's observation, "violence is as revealing an index of Mexican degeneracy as it was of the 'disintegration' of life in the various worlds of *Women in Love*",⁹ identifies the mainspring of action in Mexico. When Kate enters the bullring she knows "she [is] in a trap—a

5. Since this paper is confined to an analysis of Kate's degeneration as an individual, and the circumstances which led to this degeneration, it makes no attempt to critique some of the obviously racist overtones in *The Plumed Serpent*. To describe Mexico in terms of "a dark stream of an angry, impotent blood, and the flowers seemed to have their roots in spilt blood. The spirit of place was cruel, down-dragging, destructive" (p. 82), is to invite such charges, charges from which he is not exonerated despite Lawrence's attempts to contrast this world favourably with Europe.
6. John B. Vickery, "The Plumed Serpent and the Eternal Paradox." *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts*, Vol. V. 2 (1963) p. 124.
7. D. H. Lawrence, *op. cit.* 82.
8. Charles Rossman, "D.H. Lawrence in Mexico." *D.H. Lawrence: A Centenary Consideration*. ed. Peter Balbert and Phillip L. Marcus. Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1985) p. 193.
9. H.M. Daleski, *The Forked Flame: A Study of D. H. Lawrence*. Evanston, Illinois: North Western University Press (1965) p. 214.

big concrete beetle trap"¹⁰ and the man who comes to look at "their counterfoils is a real gutter-lout"¹¹ Before the macabre scene begins, the crowd seeks release from the tension of violence by victimizing certain selected members of the audience, a trait which is seen yet again when the crowd baits the military band. The bull-fight itself is viewed with relish because the bull plays a satisfyingly dual role. True enough, it is taunted into becoming a victim. This, however, is only after the bull has functioned as a victimizer, as this nauseous description of the going of the horse shows:

Kate knew what was coming. Before she could look away, the bull had charged on the limping horse from behind, the attendants had fled, the horse was up-ended absurdly, one of the bull's horns between his hind legs and deep in his inside. Down went the horse, collapsing in front, but his rear was still heaved up, with the bulls horns working vigorously up and down inside him, while he lay on his neck all twisted. And a huge heap of bowels coming out. And a nauseous stench. And the cries of pleased amusement among the crowd.¹²

The horror, violence, and bestiality of the scene acts as a metaphor for the entire social structure. People are either victims or victimisers. To Lawrence, Mexico is a "lice-ridden, oppressive, evil, and deathly place".¹³ The institutions set up to cure social ills are ineffectual, inconsequential, or complacent. Politics is a futile exercise dominated by pompous self-seekers. Catholicism has been unable to provide a moral or spiritual basis for the good of the country. Art becomes a substitute for crude propaganda, and the Europeans who remain take a myopic view of Mexican society, whiling away their time by trading stories about revolutionary atrocities. Thus, by the end of the third chapter, the case against Mexico has been thoroughly made.

All these observations are made by Kate, but she never transcends her own rootlessness and the disillusioning experiences she encounters. She has come to Mexico to resuscitate her spirit, but discovers that it is an unavailing task because Mexico shares some of the unsavoury features of European society and, in addition, has repulsive features of its own. Thus, both Mexico and its ironic observer, Kate, seek a saviour, and it is this need that is fulfilled by Ramon and Cipriano who have heard the saviour call "across the death rattle in contemporary Mexico".¹⁴

10. D.H. Lawrence, *op. cit.* p. 40.

11. *Ibid.* p. 40.

12. *Ibid.* p. 50-51.

13. *Ibid.* p. 197.

14. Jascha Kessler, "Descent in Darkness: The Myth of the *Plumed Serpent*" *A D. H. Lawrence Miscellany*. ed. Harry T. Moore. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press (1959) p. 242.

Jascha Kessler claims that certain incidents in the novel conform to "the great myths of mankind"¹⁵ in which

Ancient societies devised certain ceremonies for the natural (ie., biological-psychological) crises in the life of the individual, and these "rites of passage" have certain ritual myths attached to them. The myths are based on a simple formula: separation-initiation-return.¹⁶

Accordingly, Kate *separates* herself from this social world, and her journey across the lake finds her gradually moving into harmony with the "effluence" of Mexico. Lawrence emphasizes the ritualistic dimensions of this journey through his use of sexual imagery and through his suggestion of the mystical element of the landscape and the people. The boatman "rowed short and hard upon the flimsy, soft, sperm-like water",¹⁷ and "for the first time Kate felt she had met the mystery of the natives, the strange and mysterious gentleness between a scylla and a charybdis of violence, the small poised, perfect body of the bird that waves wings of thunder and wings of fire and night, in its flight".¹⁸ Furthermore, as Kate's separation from the nauseous world of the city increases, she is able to articulate, with a greater degree of clarity than before, the incomplete nature of her life:

In this country, she was afraid. But it was her soul more than her body that knew fear. She had realized, for the first time, with finality and fatality, what was the illusion she laboured under. She had thought that each individual had a complete self, a complete soul, an accomplished I. And now she realized as plainly as if she had turned into a new being, that this was not so. Men and women had incomplete selves, made up of bits assembled together loosely and somewhat haphazard. Man was not created ready-made. Men today were half-made, and women were half-made. Creatures that existed and functioned with certain regularity, but which ran off into a hopeless jumble of inconsequence (.....) A world full of half-made creatures on two legs, eating food and degrading the one mystery left to them, sex.¹⁹

The predicament that Kate finds herself in is not unusual in Laurentian fiction. Ursula Brangwen in *The Rainbow* and Rupert Birkin in *Women in Love* face the same crises. Like William Blake, Lawrence recognized the importance of opposites in life, and throughout his artistic career he sought some means whereby these adversarial forces could be channelled into a potent and life-giving force. Thus the characters in his novels who are aware of these forces seek a "spontaneous creative fulness of being" by reconciling these dualities. The ideal relationship occurs when individuals are polarized, when they achieve a "mutual unison in separation". As George Zytaruk comments:

15. *Ibid.* p. 242.

16. *Ibid.* p. 243.

17. D.H. Lawrence, *op. cit.* 122.

18. *Ibid.* p. 127.

19. *Ibid.* p. 139-40.

The most essential quality of individuality is really the result of a balanced relationship set up in an individual between the male quality and the female quality even though the individual is, outwardly at least, distinctly male or female. Individuality is achieved not through merging of the male and female "germs", but through a mysterious and unknowable connection between them that holds them in balance, so that all "existence is dual, and surging towards consummation". That which constitutes the consummation is the relation between the two dual elements.²⁰

Kate's attraction in general, to the Quetzalcoatl movement, and in particular, to the great advocates of this religion, Ramon and Cipriano, is caused by her recognition that "completeness" is possible through this medium. This, in fact, is the stated aim of Quetzalcoatl: "It is I, the Morning Star, who in Mexico was Quetzalcoatl! It is I, who look at the yellow sun from behind, have my eye on the unseen side of the moon. It is I, the star, midway between the darkness and the rolling of the sun. I, called Quetzalcoatl, waiting in the strength of my days".²¹

In the early stages of Kate's initiation, she seems to reach some kind of equilibrium. Before her transformation in Sayula, Kate is divorced from the body and attached to the spirit. She is, as Robert Macdonald says, "polarized wrongly, for as a woman her main centre should be her lower self".²² This, however, is held in abeyance when she participates in the dance. Daleski considers the dance "an insidious preparation for Kate's capitulation to Cipriano";²³ but really, there is little that is "insidious" about it. On the contrary, this is one of the rare occasions, in *The Plumed Serpent*, when Lawrence shows the gentleness and sense of touch that was to figure so prominently in *Lady Chatterly's Lover* and his later poetry. As an example of Lawrence's descriptive prose, it rivals the opening sequence of *The Rainbow*. Kate becomes totally absorbed in the dance. As the dance reaches its climax, she comes into contact with both the cosmic principle and, for the first time, her true self:

She felt her sex and her womanhood caught up and identified in the slowly revolving ocean of nascent life, the dark sky of the men lowering and wheeling above. She was not herself, she was gone, and her own desires were gone in the ocean of the great desire. As the man whose fingers touched hers was gone in the ocean that is male, stooping over the face of the waters.

20. George J. Zytaruk. "The Doctrine of Individuality: D. H. Lawrence's Metaphysic." *D. H. Lawrence: A Centenary Consideration*, ed. Peter Balbert and Phillip L. Marcus. Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1965) p. 245.

21. D.H. Lawrence, *op. cit.* p. 159.

22. Robert H. Macdonald, "The Two Principles: A Theory of the Sexual and Psychological Symbolism of D.H. Lawrence's Later Fiction." *D.H. Lawrence Review* vol. XI.2 (1978) p. 146.

23. H.M. Daleski, *op. cit.* p. 242.

The slow, vast, soft-touching revolution of the ocean above upon ocean below, with no vestige of rustling on foam. Only the pure sliding conjunction. Herself gone into her greater self, her womanhood consummated in the greater womanhood. And where her fingers touched the fingers of the man, the quiet spark, like the dawn star, shining between her and the greater manhood of men.²⁴

A perfect equilibrium is reached here. There is no mention of the dominant male. The "greater manhood" is polarized with the "greater womanhood." However, the tragedy in this novel is that Lawrence is unable to maintain this momentum. The "quiet spark" that Quetzalcoatl promises never materialises, and Kate sacrifices her self-respect and integrity for the dubious satisfaction of the "soul."

Graham Hough identifies two plots in this novel: The first is the progress of the Quetzalcoatl movement, and the second he erroneously calls Kate's *Bildungsroman*. In a *Bildungsroman*, the hero or heroine matures in the life of the novel, and, at the end, this individual gains a sense of awareness and a new identity. One could say, for instance, that Ursula grows in self-awareness at the end of *The Rainbow*. However, even if Lawrence had set out with the objective of making this novel Kate's *Bildungsroman*, that aim has not been achieved primarily because the two plots coalesce after Kate joins the Quetzalcoatl movement. If Kate develops in the manner of an Ursula, the larger political and religious dimensions will suffer. Thus, Kate's *Bildungsroman* is abandoned, as she is made into an entirely different person to fulfil the dictates of the "leadership theme". As this study is limited to an examination of Kate's degeneration, the exploration of these larger themes must, necessarily, be brief. Yet some understanding of the leadership theme is necessary, because it is largely on account of Kate's involvement with this movement that her deterioration takes place.

The Quetzalcoatl religion is based on emotionalism and absolute faith. And here, Ramon plays on the Mexicans' weakness for dance, ritual, instinctual life, and complete subservience to a leader, by providing the people with a very palatable religion:

Of themselves, they dare not revive the old motion, nor stir the blood in the old way. The spell of the past is too terrible. But in the Songs and the Hymns of the Quetzalcoatl, there spoke a new voice, the voice of a master and authority. And though they were slow to trust, the slowest and the most untrusting, they seized upon the new-old thrill, with a certain fear, and joy, and relief.²⁵

This is the attitude of the people towards this new religion, but the quintessential statement of the leadership theme is given by Ramon. The speech echoes the chilling ideas expressed in some of Lawrence's essays on the subject:

24. D.H. Lawrence, *op. cit.* p. 165.

25. *Ibid.* p. 297.

I would like.....to be one of the Initiates of the Earth. One of the Initiators. Every country its own Saviour, Cipriano; or every people its own Saviour. And the First Men of every people, forming a Natural Aristocracy of the World....Only the Natural Aristocrats of the World can be international, or cosmopolitan, or cosmic. It has always been so. The peoples are no more capable of it than the leaves of the mango tree are capable of attaching themselves to the pine.—So if I want Mexicans to learn the name of Quetzalcoatl, it is because I want them to speak with the tongues of their own blood.²⁶

The Quetzalcoatl religion, then, is an appeal to the blood consciousness. The followers have to dispense with all thought. Freedom, in the usual sense of the word, is taken away, and the individual gives complete obedience to the "Natural Aristocrat." This philosophy is rendered in symbolic terms when Ramon, the leader of the Quetzalcoatl movement, binds Cipriano, his disciple. At one level, of course, this negates some basic human assumptions, but Lawrence would argue that it has its compensations. While Ramon's actions and speeches have fascist overtones, they are based on an existentialist approach to life. Kurt F. Reinhardt, while discussing the Kierkegaardian notion of choice, makes this revealing comment:

What is at stake is the choice between the individual and the collective, between the human person and the crowd; between freedom and slavery; between Christ and Antichrist. Either: the life of the individual person, a microcosm as the image of God, capable of free, responsible action, and therefore....a life of toil and much suffering and many dangers: or, the life of an impersonal, unfree member of the collective, without the possibility of independent knowledge and responsible a life in the service of the unknown forces.²⁷

By freeing the individual from the task of making choices, the Quetzalcoatl religion does away with existential anxiety and dread. This general philosophy is carried over to personal relationships as well. If Kate is to achieve salvation in Quetzalcoatl terms, she must deny herself the freedom that she had valued so long and submit totally to the power of the dominant male.

It is here that a peculiar conundrum appears in the Quetzalcoatl religion. Ramon declares, in a long conversation with Kate about the nature of personal relationships, that "It is very easy for me to make a mistake. Very easy, on the one hand, for me to become arrogant and a ravisher. And very easy, on the other hand, for me

26. *Ibid.* p. 285.

27. Kurt F. Reinhardt, *The Existentialist Revolt: The Main Themes and Phases of Existentialism*. New York: Frederick Ungar (1960). p. 36.

to deny myself, and make a sort of sacrifice of my life".²⁸ It is this tendency to ravish and to be ravished that makes the earth a "place of sin".²⁹ The thrust of this speech suggests that, in the new relationship, the woman will have an equal status. However, these statements lead the reader into a blind alley. Cipriano is Ramon's devoted disciple, and one would expect him to practise this Quetzalcoatl philosophy in his relationship with Kate. Cipriano, however, never treats Kate as his partner; on the contrary, to all intents and purposes, he makes her his slave. In spite of a myopic and somewhat cynical approach to life, Kate, in the first few chapters, is an intelligent woman capable of sound judgement. Thus, if her capitulation to Cipriano was shown as a gradual process, the events would have been credible. This, however, Lawrence fails to do. Without preparing the reader in any way, Lawrence, makes Kate swoon under Cipriano's power:

The mystery of the primeval world! She could feel it now in all its shadowy, furious magnificence. She knew now what was the black, glinting look in Cipriano's eyes. She could understand marrying him, now. In the shadowy world where men were visionless, and winds of fury rose up from the earth, Cipriano was still a power. Once you entered his mystery the scale of all things changed, and he became a living male power, undefined, and unconfined....He was once more the old dominant male, shadowy, intangible, looming suddenly tall, and covering the sky, making a darkness that was himself and nothing but himself, the Pan male. And she was swooned prone beneath, perfect in her proneness.³⁰

Lawrence makes strenuous efforts to establish that the relationship between Kate and Cipriano is of the blood-consciousness. In her previous life, Kate had emphasised the mental-consciousness, and this is why her life lacked fulfilment. Yet this neither explains nor justifies Kate's imbecilic submission. Even in his philosophical writings, in which the mental consciousness is treated with some disfavour, Lawrence always acknowledges that the mind had a role to play. Zytaruck argues, "What he [Lawrence] is after rather, is a recognition of the part in our total lives that can be said to belong *legitimately* to the intellect, but he does not agree that the intellect should run the whole of our existence".³¹ All this, unfortunately, is here forgotten. The norms that initially allow Kate to recognize the odious features in Mexican society are abandoned and replaced by the heinous standards of the Quetzalcoatl religion. Kate's degradation proper begins in the marriage ceremony, during which Cipriano kisses her brow and breast while she has to kiss his feet and heels. Kate's self-abasement has far-reaching consequences; it makes a mockery of Lawrence's stated views on sex. In *Women in Love* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the sex act was considered salutary, if carried out by individuals who recognized their mutual individuality and integrity. The individual reaches his or her apotheosis with the orgasm, as the following lyrical, near-sacramental description from *Lady Chatterley's Lover* shows:

28. D.H. Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, (1983) p. 309.

29. *Ibid.* p. 310.

30. *Ibid.* p. 346-47.

31. George J. Zytaruck, *op. cit.* p. 248.

And it seemed she was like the sea, nothing but dark waves rising and heaving, heaving with a great swell, so that slowly her whole darkness was in motion, and she was ocean rolling its dark, dumb mass. Oh, and far down inside her the deeps parted and rolled asunder, in long, far-travelling billows, and ever, at the quick of her, the depths parted and rolled asunder, from the centre of soft plunging, as the plunger went deeper and deeper touching lower, and she was deeper and deeper and deeper disclosed, the heavier the billows of her rolled away to some shore, uncovering her, and closer and closer, plunged the palpable unknown, and further and further rolled the waves of herself away from herself, leaving her, till suddenly, in a soft, shuddering convulsion, the quick of all her plasm was touched, she knew herself touched, the consummation was upon her, and she was gone. She was gone. She was not, and she was born: a woman.³²

The female orgasm is, however, anathema to the Lawrence of *The Plumed Serpent*. In obedience to the dictates of the "Dark Gods", Kate loses her own identity and suppresses her enjoyment of sex. She insists, in her lucid moments, that she has "one tiny morning star inside her, within herself, her own very star-self".³³ But even this Cipriano denies her. Thus, the "Aphrodite of the foam" (the Laurentian term for the woman's orgasm in this novel), which would have served as some kind of compensation, is taken away.

In previous novels, Lawrence had little sympathy for those who performed intercourse in a mechanical manner. He felt that this was a symptom of the disease in industrial society. In *Sons and Lovers*, Miriam's Christian upbringing makes her consider sex a painful duty. In *The Rainbow*, Anton Skrebensky is unable to fulfil his potential as an individual because he is "null to the core of his being and content with his own individuality".³⁴ As a soldier, he loses himself to a cause; in other words, he becomes a cog in a machine. This dependence on something larger than himself perverts his sex life. In Laurentian terms, he is unable to assert himself as a male; as a consequence, his relationship with Ursula breaks down. Kate, likewise, stifles her natural urges, and persuades herself that sex is a duty, a tribute to the "Dark Gods." Her sexual encounters with Cipriano become as mechanical as some of the other relationships that Lawrence abhorred. Only here they have his sanction.

At certain points in this novel, Lawrence loses total control of his material, and this lack of control distorts further his portrayal of Kate. This becomes patent in the scene where Kate sits next to the dying Carlotta. Clark comments that

32. D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, Harmondsworth: Penguin (1984). p. 181

33. D.H. Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983). p. 423.

34. Mark. Spilka, *The Love Ethic of D. H. Lawrence*. London: Denis Dobson (1957) p. 113.

The ceremony of rededication reaches its height simultaneously with the struggle of Ramon against the old powers of the dead way, here embodied in his wife, Carlotta; and Kate, drawn into conflict once more, passes through another stage of her quest: a final revulsion against moribund holiness.³⁵

The reader's "revulsion", however, is directed at Kate. In earlier sections, Kate had shown that she was capable of compassion—witness her attempts to prevent the torturing of a bird. All these ameliorating features are discarded here, however, as she sits by Carlotta and cynically endorses Cipriano's monstrous condemnation of the dying woman:

You stale virgin, you spinster, you born widow, you weeping mother,
you impeccable wife, you just woman...Oh die-die-die!³⁶

After this scene, one would have thought that Kate's ignominy was complete, but her nadir is yet to come. In the initial sections of the novel, Kate is revolted by what she sees as the violence in the Mexican character; however, after her conversion, the yardstick she uses to judge human action is the Quetzalcoatl religion as espoused by Ramon and Cipriano. Her other standards are relinquished. In the chapter entitled "Huitzilopochtli Night", Kate is a witness to a macabre scene which ends in human sacrifice. As Daleski says:

It is painful to realize that Lawrence approves of this travesty of a trial in which Cipriano as a "Lord of Life" arrogantly assumes the power of death, in which justice is glibly pronounced in the rehearsed responses of drilled guards, and in which the only refinement is a varying of the manner of death to fit the crime.³⁷

Many commentators have noted the fascist tendencies in this chapter, but even more alarming is Kate's gradual acceptance, even vindication, of the sacrifices. Initially, she is appalled: "In one corner of her soul was revulsion and a touch of nausea".³⁸ She soon recovers from this temporary revival of her humanity, however. Not only does she refuse to judge the murderer, but to make the arcane rite complete, she sleeps with Cipriano on the very altar where, a few hours before, the executions had taken place. And, after the love-making, she feels her "virginity restored."

And she pressed him to her breast, convulsively. His innermost flame was always virginal, it was always the first time. And it made her again always a virgin girl. She could feel their two flames flowing together.

35. J.D. Clark, *op. cit.* p. 67.

36. D.H. Lawrence, *op. cit.* p. 383.

37. H.M. Daleski, *op. cit.* p. 231.

38. D.H. Lawrence, *op. cit.* p. 422.

How else, she said to herself, is one to begin again, save by re-finding one's virginity? And when one finds one's virginity, one realises one is among the gods. He is of the gods and so am I. Why should I judge him!³⁹

The Plumed Serpent, then, is not a traditional *Bildungsroman*, but a thwarted, even perverted one. Kate's numerous references to "rebirth" and restored "virginity" do not blind the reader to the fact that Kate, at the end of the novel, is at best an imbecile and at worst as culpable as the others. The "rites of passage" that began with such promise in that symbolic journey across the lake end in degradation. On rare occasions, her former self cries out for a return to sanity:

For heaven's sake let me get out of this, and back to simple human people. I loathe the very name of Quetzalcoatl and Huitzilopochtli. I would die rather than be mixed up in it anymore. Horrible, really, both Ramon and Cipriano. And they want to put it over me, with their high-flown bunk, and their Malintzi. Malintzi! I am Kate Forrester, really. I am neither Kate Leslie nor Kate Tylor. I am sick of these men putting names over me.....I want to go home. Loathsome, really, to be called Malintzi.-I have had it put over me.⁴⁰

These moments of enlightenment soon disappear, however, and Kate succumbs to the "Dark Gods" once more.

The novel has had its defenders. John Vickery, for one, suggests that "Through her [Kate] Lawrence reveals the fragmented personality the neuroses-haunted ego seeking to become an integrated human being. In Ramon we see the goal as achieved; in Kate the struggle towards that achievement".⁴¹ However, if the positive values are located in an individual who completes Cipriano's rite by giving the blood of the slain to the "Dark Gods" as "the blood of expiation," one can only ask "quo vadis, D. H. Lawrence?"

S. W. Perera

39. *Ibid.* p. 429.

40. *Ibid.* p. 407.

41. John B. Vickery, *op. cit.* p. 128.