



THE PLUMED SERPENT

In The Plumed Serpent, Lawrence shows the possibility of balancing love with "purposive activity", and the flesh with the spirit (intellect). The old Mexican god, Quetzalcoatl-The Plumed Serpent or the Bird-Snake god, whom Don Cipriano and Don Raman, the Mexican intellectuals, try to restore to Mexico, symbolizes a possible religious combination of the flesh and the spirit.³⁰⁹ Don Cipriano and Kate Leslie, the followers of Quetzalcoatl, are Laurentian-ideal man and woman who can polarize the two centers of consciousness, the blood and the brain within themselves, and are able to achieve fulfillment with each other.³¹⁰ The relation between the sexes, as shown through Cipriano and Kate, is an old oriental man-woman relationship in which a woman has to submit to "male authority."³¹¹

When Kate meets Cipriano, the Mexican general, she, a widow of forty who had two husbands, no longer yearns for the love of a man or excitement or "the thing called 'Life'".³¹² All she wants is "to be alone with the unfolding flower of her own soul, in the delicate silence that is the midst of things."³¹³ Having been exhausted by Western civilization with its over-emphasis on the mind, she runs away from the "mechanical cog-wheel people" of the civilized England to Mexico, where she hopes to find her salvation: "Give me the mystery and let the whole live again for me!...And deliver me from man's automatism."³¹⁴ Her interest in Cipriano

is aroused by her fascination of the old Mexican gods, especially Quetzalcoatl: he and Don Ramon are the leaders of the Quetzalcoatl Movement—a revolutionary Movement of religious nationalism against the priests and politicians who have usurped the antique pattern of Mexican life. Kate's relation with Cipriano is the same as her reaction to Mexico—a mixture of fascination and repulsion. To her he is both fascinating and repulsive. On the one hand she admires his co-operation with Don Ramon in reviving the ancient Mexican religion—an activity that, she thinks, is much better than any other political revolution. Kate, who "can only love a man who is fighting to change the world, to make it freer, and more alive,"³¹⁵ feels that Cipriano, with his ambition to restore the old ithypallic religion to Mexico, is superior to her dead husband, Joachin, an Irish patriot, who fought for the liberty of Ireland. But on the other hand she notices that his primitive appearance which fascinates her has a bit of horror in it: "...his eyes were black, as black as jewels into which one could not look without a sensation of fear. Yet her fear was tingled with fascination."³¹⁶

To Kate, Cipriano represents the Mexican spirit, which is horror and charm. She hates the "horror" of Mexico and wants to return to England: "Mexico is really a bit horrible to me, And the black eyes of the people really make my heart contract, and my flesh shrink. There is a bit of horror in it. And I don't want horror in my soul"³¹⁷ To this Cipriano answers:

Horror is real...Get used to it that there must be a bit of fear, and a bit of horror in your life. Marry me and you will find many things that are not horror. The bit of horror is like the sesame seed in the naught, it gives that sharp wild flavour. It is good to have it there.³¹⁸

But Kate does not believe in "horror" -- the sharp wild flavour, which Cipriano considers to be the magic element in life, the zest and mystery and wonder. She refuses to marry him, although she is drawn to him. Kate feels that she cannot stand his "horror" for all her life; and besides, she believes that marriage with an Indian like him is a kind of degradation: "He is alive, and there is a certain fascination about him. But one shouldn't try marrying a man of another race."³¹⁹ Apart from her social prejudice Kate knows that if she becomes his wife she has to submit to him. Cipriano, with his "undying Pan face,"³²⁰ represents the primitive world where "the soul of women was dumb, to be forever unspoken."³²¹ She will never be treated as American women are usually treated; but will have to yield to his "magnetic power." Kate, a self-assertive Western woman who believes in the doctrine of "living for her own life". feels that any kind of submission is a blasphemous destruction of her individuality --- the precious germ of her life. She shrinks in horror from the idea of losing her "self" in the union of love. What she wants is a "balanced conjunction", a relationship in which each is "fulfilled" and at the same time remains "individual." But Cipriano demands submissive obedience from her, and refuses to recognize her individuality. He believes that in Kate's unconsciousness exists the primeval female who wants to yield to "male authority". But Kate, influenced by her modern idea of liberty, tries to

ignore this urge. He tells her:

You think like a modern woman because you belong to the Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic world, and dress your hair in a certain way, and have money, and are altogether free. But you only think like this because you have had these thoughts put in your head...So when you say you are free, you are not free. You are compelled all the time to be thinking U.S.A. thoughts...about being a woman and being free...³²²

Kate does not believe in this, and she feels that he is bullying her with his demand for her "prone submission." He tries to destroy her belief in the supremacy of individuality. "Alone she was nothing. Only as the pure female corresponding to his pure male, did she signify...As a woman on her own, she was repulsive, and even evil to him."³²³

Cipriano tries to preach her the ancient theory that men and women are but broken fragments of one whole.³²⁴ Also he attempts to impose his idea of the "blood-relation" on her:

If we would meet in the quick, we must give up the assembled self, the daily I, and putting off ourselves one after the other, meet unconscious in the Morning Star. Body, and spirit can be transfigured into the Morning Star. But without transfiguration we shall never get there. We shall gnash at the leash.³²⁵

The "Morning Star" is a religious meeting where "the two souls coincide in their deepest desire."³²⁶ It is a true coming together of man and woman into a wholeness. Usually man and woman cannot join into oneness, because "though a woman be dearer to a man than his own life, yet he is he and she is she, and the gulf can never close up. Any attempt to close it is a violation, and the crime against the Holy Ghost."³²⁷ But in "blood-relation" they can become oneness, for "man is a column of blood: woman is a valley of blood"³²⁸ and "blood is one blood. We are all of one blood - stream."³²⁹ Only in

the communion of the blood of man and woman arises the Morning Star. Kate also believes that "the clue to all living and to all moving - on into new living-lay in the vivid blood-relation between man and woman. A man and a woman in this togetherness are the clue to all present living and future possibility."³³⁰ But she feels that the togetherness needs a balance. To live with Cipriano "it meant a submission she had never made. It meant the death of her individual self. It meant abandoning so much, even her own very foundation. For she had believed truly that every man and woman alike was founded on the individual."³³¹ Determined to preserve her individuality, Kate decides to go away from Mexico and Don Cipriano; but she cannot act out her decision. She is always under the mysterious spell of Cipriano and Mexico. Once, she goes to sit side by side with him in the pantheon as the Goddess Malintzi, the bride of the War god, Huitzilopochtli, whom he assumes to be.³³² But very soon when the "dark" power in her unconscious subsides she revolts against what she did:

For heaven's sake let me get out of this, and back to simple human people...I would die rather than be mixed up in it any more. Horrible, really, both Ramon and Cipriano. And they want to put it over me, with their high-flown bunk, and their malintze. Malintzi! I am Kate Forrester, really. I am neither Kate Leslie nor Kate Taylor. I am sick of these men putting names over me. I was born Kate Forrester, and I shall die Kate Forrester. I want to go home. Loathsome, really, to be called Malintzi...³³³

Kate wants to withdraw herself from Don Cipriano and Don Ramon, who assume themselves to be the representatives of the Gods Huitzilopochtli and Quetzalcoatl respectively. But again she cannot return to England. Kate feels:

It was as if she has two selves: one, a new one, which belonged to Cipriano and to Ramon, one which was her sensitive, desirous self; the other, hard and finished, accomplished, belonging to her mother, her children, England, her whole past. The old accomplished self was curiously invulnerable and insentient, curiously hard and "free". In it she was an individual and her own mistress. The other self was vulnerable, and organically connected with Cipriano,...and so was not "free" at all.³³⁴

Kate does not know what self she must have. "The old was a prison, and she loathed it. But in the new way she was not her own mistress at all."³³⁵ However, she has to decide exactly whether she will return to England or stay in Mexico as Cipriano's wife. Kate feels that she cannot live in Mexico, and she sees the poinsettias, which in Mexico are Christmas Flowers, and longs to see the mistletoe among the oranges in a fruitier's shop in Hampstead, buses rolling on the mud in Piccadilly on Christmas Eve. But then she thinks of the horror of the sort of life women of her own age lead in "civilization".

Another thing, she had observed, with a touch of horror: one after the other, her women "friends", the powerful love-women, at the age of forty, forty-five, fifty, they all lost their charm and allure, and turned into real grimalkins, greyish, avid, and horrifying, prowling around looking for prey that became scarcer and scarcer. As human beings they went to pieces. And they remained these grey-ribbed grimalkins, dressed in elegant clothes, the grimalkin howl even passing into their smart chatter.³³⁶

And suddenly she thinks that her ego and her individuality are not worth the price of becoming like the independent middle-aged women: "My ego and my individuality are not worth that

ghostly price.³³⁷ "I'd", says she, "abandon some of my ego, and sink some of my individuality, rather than go like that."³³⁸ She feels that she has to marry Cipriano without whom she will become "a horrible, elderly female! And when Cipriano says that he wants her, Kate yields to him. Her final surrender to Cipriano resembles Alina's surrender to Cicio, though with an added touch of sophistication, which makes it seem subtly perverse.³³⁹

Throughout the novel Lawrence emphasizes the importance of "purposive" activity in life: both Cipriano and Kate are involved with the Quetzalcoatl Movement, lead by Don Ramon who attempts to activate a spiritual rebirth in Mexico through reviving the old Aztec Gods who will provide, according to him, an authentic objective correlative for religious devotion.³⁴⁰ Although Cipriano and Kate have to devote themselves to their social work, they still have time to find fulfillment with each other in their sex relationship, which is a "blood-relation" where they are joined together mindlessly. With Cipriano Kate is brought for the first time to the true recognition of the beauty of sex; and she feels "life surging vivid and resistant within her."³⁴¹ This "blood-union" is the relation between Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, before the human consciousness became besmirched by the sense of sin; and it is where man and woman began their manhood and womanhood.³⁴² This "vivid blood-relation" between man and woman is explored fully in Lady Chatterley's Love, Lawrence's last major novel.