

SOUR GRAPES
--A Critical Review of Past and Present Literary Offerings

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Week of September 19, 2010
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Book Review of:
The Plumed Serpent
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THE PLUMED SERPENT

(1926)

Written by DH Lawrence.

Review by Paul Lambrecht.

Grade: B-

I could understand why this book is not so well-known or read nowadays.

It is primarily about a primitivist rabble rouser named Don Ramon who is trying to bring back the Mexican god Quetzalcoatl to usurp the influence of Christianity on the subjugated Mexican Indian populace, and cast off the yokes of socialism, capitalism, and European and American Imperialism, which all equally exploit them.

To achieve this end, Don Ramon and his lieutenant, Cipriano, establish themselves as the living incarnations of ancient Mexican deities, and militate their political aims of power and cultural autonomy through a set of symbolic actions and meaningful pageantry which resonate with these aborigines via their ancient Pre-Christian religious cores.

For the Mexican Indians, this means a reconnection with the dark serpentine atavistic powers of the violent volcanic soil and a living awareness of that mindset present at the dawn of their timeless world.

Don Ramon uses his wealth, power and influence, acquired under the old regime, to brainwash the main character Kate, and cultivate a mystique among the peon Indians of his hacienda and the fictional rural lake port town of Sayla, by embracing the humble cotton garments of his field workers, becoming a sort of proletarian hero to them, and by reviving the traditional hypnotic dancing and drumming rituals.

The heart of the conflict in this story is that universal concept of hubris. Don Ramon flirts with reawakening this ancient earth religion but by doing so, deludes himself about his own status as a living god.

And this hubris / heresy has implications for Kate as well. She is an expat from Ireland and natural aristocrat, and allows herself to become one of the ruling goddesses in this growing cult.

Ironically, the least deep part of this book is when it discusses anything to do with religion. Religion, for Lawrence, no matter how deeply engrained into our modern lives, remains at core for him, a perversion of that true and ancient tribal blood consciousness. Exemplified in the book by the irresistible call of that ancient serpent-god Quetzalcoatl's blood sacrifice. But Lawrence advocates a return to ancient religion among those of all races: Teutons, Druids, and the Chinese with their dragon-worship.

In this story, Kate is repulsed and ultimately consumed by the indifferent and deeply atavistic Mexican peons, who roam the surface like dark crystals with flinty cipher-like eyes, completely indifferent as to whether they live or die, and are animated by an ancient soulless power.

In the end, that's kind of a scary notion, and perhaps has more to do with Lawrence's subconscious anticipation of the brewing fascist storms about to toss Europe into chaos, and less to do with the real Mexican Indians, who rarely are more than two-dimensional props for Lawrence to expound on his literarily-couched racist sexualist philosophy.