

Understanding *Sons and Lovers*

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Abstract

Sons and Lovers is one of the best-known works of the most influential however controversial writer, D. H. Lawrence. He is best known as the writer of the Modern tradition of English literature. Undertones of autobiographical elements permeate the whole book as it is said to have elements and experiences very similar to Lawrence's own early life and it is rightfully so. The paper traces elements of Antifeminism. Antifeminism is opposite to feminism in all respects. Feminism empowers women's equality in the society, whereas antifeminism endorses women's position in the society subordinate to men. Antifeminists think society should be modeled on the different roles of sexes. Men should work outside home and women should work inside the walls of home. Antifeminists are basically traditionalists and they think that men and women are complementary to each other. If women are not given different roles to play in the society then traditional structures of society would be destroyed. In this novel, one can easily find the antifeminist tendencies of the novelist.

Keywords- *Traditionalist, Patriarchy, Exploitation, Sensuousness*

Sons and Lovers (1913) is a novel written by Lawrence. It contains various autobiographical details. However, the early descriptions of the protagonist, Paul Morel makes him appear strikingly feminine (just the way Lawrence was in his childhood) – a frail boy who related much more to the opposite sex, was physically weak and took the fancy of books. This is the same boy who grows up to be an artist, again, not a very masculine occupation. In fact, the whole novel has been presented as Paul's search for fulfillment and his journey for self-exploration, for which he "uses" three women. Is Lawrence trying to tell the readers that this is the lack that boys with a more "feminine" side feel? We also encounter the influence of first wave of Feminism in Lawrence's writings. The "New Woman" is very well projected in the novel as, first, Mrs. Morel,

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the “ruthlessly domineering and subtly manipulative” mother, Miriam, Paul’s beautiful and intellectual muse, and Clara, the extremely attractive and independent woman. Yet all of them turn into mere objects that Paul uses on his way self-discovery and then throws away. It is interesting to see that despite of all events, Lawrence manages to keep the readers’ sympathy inclined towards the male characters - first, Walter Morel and then, Paul himself. Mrs. Morel, in a sort of an invisible tactic, becomes the woman who robs her husband, the drinking miner, of all authority and influence over their children and raises her sons as everything that the earthy, impassionate and uneducated father was not. She is herself a victim of patriarchy which turned her identity into that of the wife and nothing more. Her actual name “Gertrude Coppard” is used by Lawrence only twice in the whole text. Paul poisons her not only to ease her pain but also to release his suppressed frustration and to be able to actually move on, as he had realized that he cannot do so until and unless she dies. “I never shall meet the right woman while you live.” Then comes Miriam, the country girl who dwelled in her world of imagination with a larger-than-life outlook towards life itself. She is the one who observes Paul’s unmatched enthusiasm for art, becomes his muse and treats him intellectually. But Paul has a habit called “projection” in psychological terms. He projects his own weaknesses and unwanted characteristics onto another person, which turn into the very characteristics he despises them for. His own restraints are projected in Miriam who gets reminded that she is “a nun- a nun!” when she slips her arm into his, and thus, Paul share a love-hate relationship with her. The mother and Miriam are shown as mirror images of each other, both constituting the soul element. Mrs. Morel absolutely hates Miriam, the way women were supposed to hate each other. Here again, the Lawrentian style of writing subtly collects the sympathy vote for Paul, who is innocently caught between this jealousy and insecurity of the same sex. The third woman Clara is depicted as the epitome of carnal desire and is the flesh symbol, standing in complete contrast with the other two women with whom Paul had an intense but platonic relationship. Yet he believes that this divinely attractive woman can never possess his “spirit” and thus, she too becomes only a useful object for Paul to use and throw on his journey for self-fulfillment. This strong and bold woman fulfils the physical void in Paul and in a way, makes him a “man”. After his emasculation, Paul thinks it better to “move on” after having oscillated between and then exploited all three. May be Lawrence is trying to show us readers the inevitable fate of the modern, “manly” woman. Not just the mother but all three women, therefore,

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die for him and by him, as the novel reaches its conclusion, revealing the “phallic pride” (245) a term given by Simon de Beauvoir in her book, *The Second Sex*, of both Paul as well as Lawrence.

Though the outlines of the characters and events in the novel owe largely to the real life memories of the novelist the shades filling these outlines are provided by his incomplete and grotesque view of life. In all essential, he has interpreted his own experiences in terms of the Freudian Oedipus complex though at this stage he knew about Freud only at second hand. Through this novel what the novelist wants to convey to his readers is that owing to what is called ‘mother fixation’ he had never been able to make a happy emotional adjustment with the other women. Paul is seen explaining to his mother the reason behind his inability to find the ‘right woman’: “And I never shall meet the right woman while you live”, (395) he said.

There are a number of critics who are convinced by this argument proposed by Lawrence. Middleton Murray is the one to believe that Lawrence’s mothering had made him incapable of having normal relationship with any other woman. And Graham Hough calls the novel “the first Freudian novel in English.” (40). Nevertheless, these viewpoints can’t blind an observant reader towards Lawrence’s strategy of an antifeminist behavior and we can’t forget that his own inherent disabilities provided a fertile ground for such justification.

However, the theme of the novel gives a vast scope for the treatment of Lawrence’s favourite subject—a conflict of vitality and gentility. This theme is worked out most conspicuously in the relationship of Walter Morel and Gertrude Morel. Though, Lawrence presents the picture from the point of view of a son whose mother, ‘a woman of character and refinement’, has been deprived of her share of satisfaction from her marriage with an uncouth and drinking man, he does not shut the doors of sympathy for the poor miner. A strong sense of pathos is attached to him in his defeat by his wife who is stronger and more intelligent. There is no doubt that Gertrude Morel, a refined and cultured woman from ‘a good old burgher family’, has to face an ordeal of adapting herself to the miserable life of a miner’s wife, but if our sympathy lies with her husband. The novelist has given sufficient reasons to believe that marriage has caused a lasting damage, both physical and moral, to this dancing miner who, once, was full of ‘sensuous flame of life. ‘We are clearly informed in the initial pages of the novel that Gertrude Coppard with her curious receptive mind, deeply religious’ outlook, and ‘proud and unyielding’ temper was too much opposite to the non-intellectual and lively miner who had ‘a rich, ringing laugh’ and was ‘so full of colour and animation’, she was ‘rather contemptuous of dancing’ and with him it was ‘natural and joyous to dance’; she ‘loved ideas’ and he

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often did the right thing, by 'instinct', and so on. Thus the conflict between Walter and Gertrude can be seen as an opposition between body and mind, flesh and spirit-the eternal Lawrentian strife. Consequently, Gertrude's attempt at reforming her husband proves to be ruinous for Morels's vital and overbearing personality: "The pity was, she was too much his opposite. She could not be content with the little he might be, she would have him the much that he ought to be. So, in seeking to make him nobler than he-could be, she destroyed him." (25) When it becomes to her that her husband can't be brought from his level of vitality to her position of gentility, she uses the strongest and unfailing weapon of a woman-she sets her children against their father, which makes Morel degenerate gradually as he feels his alienation:

Here, he becomes a figure to be pitied for he is an 'outsider' in his own home (just like George in *The White Peacock* and Siegmund in *The Trespasser*). His mere presence makes his wife and children sicken with disgust, and his departure is a relief to them. And this sense of isolation completes his ruin. However, it will not be incongruous to mention here what frank Kermodé feels about the defeat of the poor miner, which according to him is the "defeat of the dark virility of the pit, of unashamed and easy male grace and strength, beauty with its roots in muck." (18)

But the thing which immediately strikes our mind is that though Lawrence mentions the social difference between 'a woman of character and refinement' and a poor miner he does not seem to recognize this difference, and, thus, relates the disastrous consequences of this marriage with the conflict between the male principle and the female. And this partial vision of the novelist distorts the reality. The conflict between husband and wife is presented as an eternal war of sexes, whereas, in reality, it owes a great deal of the disparity between their social statuses.

However, the strife between the male principle and the female one does not end with the story of Walter Morel and his wife. We feel as if the curse of struggle is passed from one generation to another, thus, making the sons go through similar fate. Let us start with the eldest son of Walter Morel, William Morel who, after coming in contact with his fiancée, Miss Western meets his ultimate disaster in the form of his tragic death. Though he is presented as the son of his mother, the qualities he inherits from his father are too conspicuous to be ignored. He runs 'like the wind', dances well and admires 'all kinds of flower like ladies' keeping down the puritan notions of his mother. Significantly, he tells his father: "You see I'm following in my father's footsteps." (73)

No doubt, the germ of life which seems to dominate William's personality has its origin in his father's vitality. But his sanguineness turns to gloom after careless and vain Miss western enters his

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life. The fact that the fascination of William for this enchanting girl will be disastrous is ascertained by Paul's statement, which declares Lily 'a young witch woman'. And it does not take long before tension starts developing between the two lovers, and William realizes that he is in a deadlock. His inability to come out of this situation torments him continually: "He was pale, and his rugged face, that used to be so perfectly careless and laughing, was stamped with conflict and despair." (*Sons and Lovers*: 162)

Almost every male-female relationship in the novel is a misstep and this is further confirmed by Arthur's marriage to Beatrice. Of all the three brothers he is the most 'wild and restless', a 'creature of the moment', thus, the fitting son of goddess life. But, once he marries Beatrice he gets 'caught', and irrespective of 'how he kicked and struggled', he is 'fast. It is evident that the story of Arthur and Beatrice provides a fitting material to give rise to a typical Lawrentian tragedy. But fortunately, the story is not given much space and attention to develop properly.

Further, though Paul sees himself as the son of his mother, the deep roots of the vital male principle connects him with his father. In fact, the spark of life that flows through the body of Walter Morel is felt to have its deep impact on the personality of his son also. Thus, in spite of an apparent antagonism the vital bond between the father and the son cannot be denied. Here, it is interesting to mention that in later life Lawrence confessed that he had been unjust to his father and if he were to write the book again he would be more sympathetic to him. Another thing, which verifies this thing, is a passage from *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, which runs as follow:

...if the large parent mother-germ still lives and acts vividly and mysteriously in the great fused nucleus of your solar plexus, does the smaller, brilliant male-spark that is derived from your father act any less vividly?...So beware how you deny the father-quick of yourself. You may be denying the most intrinsic quick of all. (*Sons and Lovers*: 61)

Moreover, Paul tells Miriam that, despite her fateful marriage, his mother had received through his father that 'real, real flame of feeling' which is necessary for anybody's 'living and developing'.

Similar kind of zeal for life has been stressed in Paul, and this is the factor, which distinguishes him from Miriam as Keith Sagar comments: Throughout the novel "this faculty for being in touch with life has been stressed in Paul, and its absence in Miriam."(49) Miriam is shown to be an introvert and timid girl with a hypersensitive soul. Away from the humming activities of the

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day-to-day world, she prefers to live in her own world of reveries, where nobody would call her passion for abstraction. Whereas, to Paul it is the vital sensuous experience of life which matters most, Miriam's whole world is encompassed by her spirituality: "She seemed to need things kindling in her imagination or in her soul, before she felt she had them. And she was cut off from ordinary life, by her religious intensity, which made the world for her either a nunnery garden, or a paradise where sin and knowledge were not, or also ugly cruel thing." (179)

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