

Sons and Lovers

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Sons and Lovers was started in the latter part of 1910 but revised and rewritten several times during the time Lawrence worked in Croydon as a pupil teacher. He finished it in 1912, after he eloped with Frieda to Gargnano. It is based on Lawrence's own life. Published in 1913, it is possibly the most widely read English novel of the twentieth century. The book falls into two parts. The first describes the early married life of a coal miner and his wife, and also the youth and adolescence of their children. The miner, Morel, is illiterate, and no match for his wife who is a former pupil-teacher with aspirations towards the middle classes. What for the most part is shown to the reader is a sustained, exhausting conflict between husband and wife. The second part is virtually a different book, with Paul Morel's growing up and his awakening to the possibilities of the world as its main subject, seen in association with the chronicle of the early family life of the Morels in the first half.

The novel capitalizes on the *Bildungsroman*, a form of fiction that allows the novelist to recreate through the maturing of his protagonist some of his own intensity of experience. In Ireland there is the example of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, published in 1916. *Sons and Lovers* marks a great advance for Lawrence when compared to the two novels he had written before. '*Sons and Lovers*, far more than *The Trespasser*,' says Philip Hobsbaum in his Reader's Guide¹, 'is the logical and welcome development out of *The White Peacock*.' In a letter dated 18 October 1910, Lawrence's own comment says: '*Paul Morel*' (as he initially planned to call *Sons and Lovers*) 'will be a novel - not a florid prose poem, or a decorated idyll running to seed in idealism: but a restrained, somewhat impersonal novel'². From this comment we must conclude that Lawrence could be very self-critical, and was dissatisfied with his earlier novels on account of their exaggerated language.

Sons and Lovers is one of the first wholly authentic novels of English working class life, set mainly in an industrialized community, as opposed to the agricultural setting of *The White Peacock*. Moreover, it is the setting of Lawrence's youth; the author grew up within the society he is depicting. We are introduced immediately to the atmosphere of 'the Bottoms', six blocks of miners' dwellings, into which the Morel family moved in their early married life. Usual surroundings for a miner's family, yet Mrs Morel feels out of place. When the story begins she is thirty-one, and has been married for eight years; 'a rather small woman, of delicate mould but resolute bearing, she shrank a little from the first contact with the Bottoms

¹ See endnote iii, p.46 ff.

² See endnote ii, p.34

women' (p.9). A mother of two, expecting her third, she is no exception to the rule; however, she has little in common with the other 'stay-at-home' mothers. From the first pages of the story it is obvious that she is not happy in her marriage; she feels tied to her husband and despises him. Motherhood is a burden to her; she feels 'wretched with the coming child' and 'buried alive' at the prospect of her life (p.12).

Mrs Morel, née Gertrude Coppard, is 'of a good old burgher family', famous independents who had fought with Colonel Hutchinson, and who remained 'stout Congregationalists' (p.14 ff.). Her father, George Coppard, was foreman of the engineers in the dockyard at Sheerness, 'a large, handsome, haughty man, proud of his fair skin and blue eyes, but more still of his integrity.' Gertrude has his temper; 'proud and unyielding.' As a young woman of nineteen she had been close friends with a boy called John Field, the son of a well-to-do tradesman, quite educated and religious, who would have been a conventional suitor at a certain time. However, they lose contact and when she is twenty-three Gertrude meets a young man from Erewash valley, Walter Morel, a young miner, then twenty-seven. There is a strong chemistry between them right from the beginning (p. 17 ff.). Walter is fascinated by Gertrude; 'he seemed melted before her.' She is an attractive woman, small and delicate, with brown silk curls and blue eyes; she wears fine clothes and speaks the Queen's English, as opposed to Walter's own Erewash dialect. 'She was to the miner that thing of mystery and fascination, a lady.' And he fascinates her, too; he is unlike any man she has known in her Puritan upbringing. She is thrilled by the joyous glamour in his movement as he dances, his handsome, sensual appearance, his warm, friendly manners. The life he has had in the mines, as from his early childhood days, seems to her noble and admirable; 'he risked his life daily, and with gaiety.' His sense of humour appeals to her; 'soft, non-intellectual, warm, a kind of gambolling.'

Unlike Lettie in *The White Peacock* Gertrude gives in to her feelings of sensuous enchantment, and the next Christmas they are married. To the young woman her husband is the world. Walter adores her, and goes to great length to please her; 'for three months she was perfectly happy; for six months she was very happy' (p.19). Between men and women, in Lawrence's view, 'blood contact', not mental communion, is a prerequisite. For Walter and Gertrude a mutual 'passion of the blood' must have proved victorious at least in the very early stages of their married life. As we will hear from their son Paul at the end of the novel, it is even the reason why his father and mother stayed together in spite of their disrupted marriage. After the first elation wears off and Gertrude tries to open her heart seriously to her husband, she sees her efforts at a finer intimacy end in failure. In matters of the mind she is his

opposite; she has a 'curious, receptive mind', enjoys listening to other people. 'She loved ideas, and was considered very intellectual. What she liked most of all was an argument on religion or philosophy or politics with some educated man' (p.17). Walter is not educated, and what is far more, he has not told her the truth about what she considers very fundamental issues in a marriage. Her first disillusion presents itself when the house she thought he owned turns out to be his mother's; they are mere tenants of her in-laws. Even worse, he makes light of the debts he has run up when buying furniture. Gertrude feels he has disregarded her as his partner in decisions of importance, taking counsel with his mother instead. This is more than she can take (p.22): 'something in her proud and honourable soul had crystallized out hard as rock.' Her manner changes towards him; in his turn, Walter withdraws more and more into his own world, taking more and more to drinking.

From now on their marriage is on the wrong track and becomes a matter of one blow after another to Gertrude's 'proud soul'. Walter's pledge to wear 'the blue ribbon of the teetotaler' (p.19) is his next lie; he is in the habit of going to the pub with his mates. His wife's finding out through the neighbours makes it downright degrading to her. Where Gertrude would have been hard put to it to lead the humble life of a miner's wife in the first place, this becomes impossible with a violation of her morals on top of it. And she is quite alone in her despair; he is a wall of incomprehension, too different from her. The birth of their first son does not bring them closer together but mainly deepens their discord. Born at a moment when the mother's life is at a low point of bitterness and disillusion the child becomes the object of her passion; motherhood is a refuge for Gertrude. There is very little room left for Morel, he is made an outsider: 'She turned to the child, she turned from the father.' In her view, he has 'no grit'; Gertrude despises his giving in to his momentary impulses and his inability to abide by anything and she sees these qualities as signs of weakness. 'There began a battle between the husband and wife'; a battle, as Lawrence adds, 'that ended with the death of one.' It is the battle between his own parents, and throughout the novel he is biased - with exceptions, as we will see - in the direction of his mother.

Still, the author later came to regret the way in which he had portrayed his father. 'Lawrence, in his later books,' says Alastair Niven ³, 'came to admire the type of man which he believed his father to have been far more than would appear from his portrait of Walter Morel, who is presented initially as unreasonably ill-tempered, then as weak-willed, and finally as an empty husk from whom the kernel of life has been removed.' As the novel

³ See endnote ii, p.35 ff

proceeds, not much is left of the charming Morel that captured Gertrude's heart, and their first happy days together are not to return. Morel becomes a lazy, irresponsible drunk, a violent coward, keeping bad company with friends like Jerry Purdy and neglecting his duties as a father and husband. The atmosphere between husband and wife is downright aggressive (p.33):

They were now at battle-pitch. Each forgot everything save the hatred of the other and the battle between them. She was fiery and furious as he. They went on till he called her a liar. 'No,' she cried, starting up, scarce able to breathe. 'Don't call me that - you, the most despicable liar that ever walked in shoe - leather.' She forced the last words out of suffocated lungs. 'You're a liar!' he yelled, banging the table with his fist. 'You're a liar, you're a liar.'

She stiffened herself with clenched fists. 'The house is filthy with you,' she cried. 'Then get out on it - it's mine. Get out on it!' he shouted. 'It's me as brings th' money whoam, not thee. It's my house, not thine. Then get out on't - get out on't!'

'And I would,' she cried, suddenly shaken into tears of impotence. 'Ah, wouldn't I, wouldn't I have gone long ago, but for those children. Ay, haven't I repented not going years ago, when I'd only the one' - suddenly drying into rage. 'Do you think it's for *you* I stop - do you think I'd stop one minute for *you*?' 'Go then,' he shouted, beside himself. 'Go!'

However, Lawrence adds: 'He was afraid of her.' Morel, in his illiteracy, cannot compete with his verbal, articulate wife. Primitive as he is in his drunkenness, he uses brute force to maintain his authority, shutting his pregnant wife outdoors in the middle of the night, before falling into a drunken sleep himself: 'He dipped gradually into a stupor, from exhaustion and intoxication' (p.34). Yet the reader would find it hard to think of Morel as completely hateful. There are instances in which the author tries to be fair to Morel. He is also shown as a good father to the children, kind to his wife and content with the routine of his working days as a miner (p.82 ff.). 'He was a good workman, dexterous, and one who, when he was in a good humour, always sang.' The children love his stories about the pit and his making fuses from wheat-straws for them. The portrait of his having breakfast in the kitchen during the early morning hours, taking boyish pleasure in toasting his bacon on a fork and pouring his tea into his saucer captures the reader's sympathy. When his wife is dying, like in the event when Paul is ill, his gentle nature is portrayed in his 'timid fashion' (p.458).

Likewise, Mrs Morel is not completely loveable. She has a possessive grip on her sons, in which she places herself beyond her husband's criticism of her putting the children up to her own tricks (p.77). She does not grant the simple, impulsive man his dignity. 'She could not be content with the little he might be; she would have him the much he ought to be. So, in

seeking to make him nobler than he could be, she destroyed him' (p.25). She seems fully convinced of her belief that her object in marriage is to lift her humble, superficial husband to a higher plane: 'His nature was purely sensuous, and she strove to make him moral, religious' (p.23). She carries a belief similar to what society instilled in women of Victorian times: 'she still had her high moral sense inherited from generations of Puritans.' The Victorian literature that preceded Lawrence has as one of the most striking characteristics its preoccupation with an ideal of womanhood that has commonly been described as 'the angel of the house', after the title of a well-known poem. As the title suggests, this angel brings a purity of high morality into the home, which benefits both her husband and the children. The century's religious and economic crises threatened the stability of many traditional values, and many Victorian writers relocated those values in the home and the woman who was its centre. It was she who could create a sanctuary for the anxieties of modern life. They regard her with a sentimental reverence; she is put on a pedestal as an object of courtly love, like her counterparts in the Middle Ages. As a Magna Mater she is far above her partner's sexual desire for her, like Helena in *The Trespasser*. Morel does not conform to Gertrude's standards. As the novel proceeds he becomes a vulgar and immoral man and the children have to be sheltered from their father rather than from modern life.

In the characterization of Morel as physical, sensual and natural versus Gertrude as spiritual and intellectual the reader recognizes Lawrence's way of opposing men and women. In his earlier novels we saw the physical George and the spiritual Lettie of *The White Peacock* and the spiritual Helena with the physical Siegmund in *The Trespasser*. Walter and Gertrude are not only fictional characters but also represent Lawrence's parents, not created solely by the author but developing in the context of their social environment. As in many parts of the world is still the case today, the status of the husband is automatically the status of the wife. Gertrude's own, more educated background seems to vanish into thin air in the mining community of The Bottoms, where her chief companions are the 'stay at home' mothers to whom she feels alien. As a woman of intelligence and intellect she is rather alone: "'What have I to do with this?" she said to herself. "What have I to do with all this? Even the child I am going to have! It doesn't seem as if I were taken into account."'(p.13). She feels her life is 'not real', herself 'slurred over'. She enjoys a talk with 'some educated man', but opportunities to this are limited to her talks with the Congregational clergyman Mr Heaton, which add to the marital discord. Morel is downright rude to his wife's visitor. He embarrasses the clergyman by asking him to feel his sweaty singlet as an illustration of what a hard day's work means to a working man, as opposed to the easy life of a man of the cloth (p.47). The event

reminds us of the anecdote of Arthur Lawrence's reaction to his son's first novel and illustrates the gap between the life of a workman and that of an intellectual. Lawrence uses the broad regional dialect of his father to enhance the contrast between the two men: "'Nay," said Morel, showing his hand, "look thee at it! Tha niver wants ter shake hands wi'a hand like that, does ter? There's too much pick-haft and shovel-dirt on it.'"

Because of this gulf Gertrude does not have the opportunity of middle-class Lettie to 'entertain and all that', even though this is developed in *The White Peacock* as a negative example of what a woman could do with her life. As early as the 1860s the woman question had become one of the most important topics of the day. Job opportunities, marriage laws, female emigration and education were only some of the issues debated at the time. Women themselves - and particularly middle-class women - were increasingly concerned with what their roles were, and what they should be. Pioneers of the women's movement did not argue so much for the similarity of women to men as for the existence of women's special skills in regard to children, health care, education and domestic morality. Such talents would give the family a happier life, and also help to eliminate the most grievous wrongs of society. Demands for increased job opportunities and freedom of action were subordinated to family responsibilities and personal respectability. The judgement of society on the private and public behaviour of women was often severe for unconventional fictional characters, such as Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure* (1896). Naturally an 'honourable soul' like Gertrude would hold devotion to the family in high esteem, and expect to be valued by her husband.

At the time of writing of *Sons and Lovers* possibilities for women to pursue interests outside the home were limited. It was not till after World War I that their opportunities increased. Gertrude is seen as an active member of the Women's Guild when the children are a little older, with an implied consent on their part: 'It was the only thing to which they did not grudge their mother' (p.68). The women discuss the benefits to be derived from co-operation, and other social issues. Once the children have got used to the idea of their mother's activities they feel respect and admire her reading the paper, referring to books and writing things down. The men, however, tend to be hostile to the idea of their wives being engaged outside the home and see it as a threat to domestic life. This is an example of how new developments in society turn out to be alienating to the relationship between husband and wife, as opposed to the mores of a more rural farming life in which the family worked together. Emily of *The White Peacock* is an example of a farmer's daughter, and we have seen Lettie taking pleasure in working the land together with George, even though she does not become a farmer's wife.

The separation of work and home, a result of industrialization and urbanization, means the loss of the traditional female world of work, as well as the alienation of the husband from his wife and the father from his family. From now on the man is the out of doors breadwinner, the woman seeing her economic function reduced from co-worker to housewife, living in dependence of her husband's income.

This is not the - male - worker's point of view. He sees it as gain for her. His wife does not have to spend long hours in the factory, but can devote herself entirely to the children and the household, which is a luxury. Many working men and also women now think it proper for the man to be able to keep his wife and family without the necessity of their obtaining paid employment. According to the standards of his class of miners, Walter is pulling his load. Having a pint in the pub after a hard day's work is the usual thing to do; his mates all do so and most likely without their wives complaining. Walter and Gertrude hold utterly different ethics and this is the main reason why their relationship develops negatively. Philip Hobsbaum remarks ⁴: 'It is as though each of these characters, husband and wife though they are, was born to oppose the other.' Their opposition is not only a clash between the different Lawrencean personality traits of the intellectual versus the sensual, but a clash between different worlds as well: that of gender, of class, of religion. Neither character gains from this opposition: neither Walter nor Gertrude ends up a moral winner, they both lose.

At the beginning of the book Morel is a simple and superficial man, but also lively and positive; he is charming, has a sense of humour, is a good dancer, has gusto and alacrity. Gradually his role in the family develops from bad to worse. Like George in *The White Peacock* Morel becomes a hopeless drunk, bullying his family and making their life a misery. He is cruel to his children, who hate him (p.48): William hates him with 'a boy's hatred for false sentiment, and for the stupid treatment of his mother' and Annie never liked him; 'she merely avoided him.' Paul even prays to God to let his father die if he will not give up drinking (p.79). Along with this, he is no longer up to his work (p.51): 'His work seemed to exhaust him. When he came home he did not speak civilly to anybody.' His wife has more respect for a dog than for him (p.53): 'I'd wait on a dog at the door first.' He is pictured to the reader as a thieving little fraud when he steals drinking money from Gertrude's purse and hotly denies it afterwards. His decision to put a stop to the degrading marital sham by running away is merely another degradation of himself; he returns that very evening, looking a fool who has sunk so low as to be even beyond his wife's anger. Gradually she is casting him off,

⁴ See endnote iii, p.48

and turning for love and life to the children: 'Henceforward he was more or less a husk' (p.62). He becomes as a helpless victim of the Magna Mater: 'And he half acquiesced, as so many men do, yielding their place to the children.' An outsider to his family, he is shut off from all family affairs, good enough to eat stale bread from the dust and dirt of the pit floor. He cannot safely be left alone with the mother of his children, who dare not go to sleep until reassured that in spite of his presence she is still alive and well (p.78). His downfall does not stop at that, he becomes a dud of unsound mind, one who can hardly be trusted to walk about freely (p.106 ff.): 'And what 's he done this time?...Eh, dear, what a one he is! There's not five minutes of peace.' When he ends up in hospital after one of his stupid, careless accidents he seems to be in need of watch and ward as if he were a demented nonentity. Finally his son Arthur, once his favourite, 'hated him most of all' (p.143).

Gertrude loses in dignity, too. Throughout the book she remains Puritan, spiritual and passionate, but she does not remain the lady Walter fell in love with. Even though she is strong-minded and loving, her jeering at her husband cannot be seen as refined, least of all in instances when the children are present. In fact, she abuses her power as a mother to enlist them against their father, stooping to the level of Meg in *The White Peacock*. Gertrude has long ago given up on her marriage and turns to the children, especially Paul: 'she felt as if the navel string that had connected its frail little body with hers had not been broken' (p.50 ff.). The feeling is initiated by the guilt she feels for 'having brought it into the world unloved'; 'she felt, in some far inner place of her soul, that she and her husband were guilty'. She looks for forgiveness and comfort with the baby, placing a heavy emotional claim on him, coming to see her sons not as autonomous beings but as 'derived from her'; they are to 'work out what *she* wanted' (p.127). Paul feels a repressed resentment of her domination, as Lawrence indicates symbolically in the burning of 'Missis Arabella': 'An' I'm glad there's nothing left of her', says young Paul, after having 'sacrificed' the doll (p.75). Mrs Morel does not show us the Magna Mater as an 'unassailable tower of strength' as Lawrence describes the mother with a child in her arms. She develops into a lonely woman, clinging to her sons in her search for comfort and meaning in life, incorporating them as emotional dependants.

First there is William, Paul's more outgoing older brother and rival in motherly affection, who is Gertrude's pride: 'already he was getting a big boy. Already he was top of the class, and the master said he was the smartest lad in the school. She saw him a man, young, full of vigour, making the world glow again for her' (p.63). And he can partly replace her incompetent breadwinner: 'Mrs Morel hoped, with his aid, to help her younger sons' (p.72 ff.). A most ambitious worker and student, at twenty he gets a well-paid job in London,

feeling very happy at the prospect of getting on in the world and helping his mother financially. Still his leaving the family is intolerable to her:

It never occurred to him that she might be more hurt at his going away than glad of his success. Indeed, as the days drew near for his departure, her heart began to close and grow dreary with despair. She loved him so much! More than that, she had hoped in him so much. Almost she lived by him ... Now he was going away. She felt almost as if he were going as well out of her heart. He did not seem to leave her inhabited with himself. That was the grief and the pain to her. He took nearly all himself away.

In her relationship with her sons she cannot provide mature guidance (p.163 ff.), and both William and Paul develop weak emotional selves. William is unable to decide what is best for him; 'he was accustomed to having all his thoughts sifted through his mother's mind.' In accordance with his mother's ambitions he wants to rise up the social ladder, clinging to the superficial Gyp mainly for her higher social airs (p.73): "'This girl's father," said William, "is as rich as Croesus. He owns property without end.'" He lives by unhappy dependence on his empty-headed betrothed, this 'rag doll', unable to resolve the conflict and feeling condemned to lameness and immobility: "'But I can't give her up now; it's gone too far", he said. "And, besides, for some things I couldn't do without her." ... "I can't give her up *now*", he said.' Gertrude, feeling that she bears some responsibility for his bad choice, is hoping for the best but feels unable to advise him; her relationship with her son is highly symbiotic, laming both the son's and the mother's souls until death literally resolves the situation. On 14 November 1912 Lawrence wrote to Edward Garnett, his early mentor, about his ideas on the mother-son relationships in *Sons and Lovers*¹:

These sons are *urged* into life by their reciprocal love of their mother - urged on and on. But when they come to manhood, they can't love, because their mother is the strongest power in their lives, and holds them. It's rather like Goethe and his mother and Frau von Stein and Christina - as soon as the young men come into contact with women, there's a split. William gives his sex to a fribble, and his mother holds his soul. But the split kills him, because he doesn't know where he is.

Paul grows up in pathetic mother-centredness. 'A pale, quiet child', seeming old for his years, he becomes vulnerable to his mother's inner state of mind as he grows up: 'He was so conscious of what other people felt, particularly his mother. When she fretted he understood,

and could have no peace: 'his soul seemed always attentive to her' (p.75). It is his 'childish aim' to make up for his mother's unfulfilled life, and his own incapability hurts him (p.85). A telling scene of the Oedipal relationship with his mother is when Paul, having a weak constitution, is laid up with an attack of bronchitis (p.85 ff.). When the father comes into the sickroom, always very gentle if anyone is ill, 'he disturbed the atmosphere for the boy.' Paul wants his mother; his illness is partly a disguised plea for her attention. Loving though Morel may be to his convalescing son, he does not get anywhere near him, his presence makes the boy 'feverish with irritation', aggravating all his sick impatience and he is relieved when finally left alone. 'Paul loved to sleep with his mother. Sleep is still most perfect, in spite of hygienists, when it is shared with a beloved'. Paul gets better when lying close to her, 'the warmth, the security and peace of soul, the utter comfort from the touch of the other, knits the sleep, so that it takes body and soul completely in its healing.'

The way in which Lawrence describes Gertrude's love for Paul as ambiguous may be seen as an unhealthy and probably even private charge, in which the author tries to come to terms with his own mother fixation. Paul causes an 'old, weary feeling' rising in her heart, 'she had never expecting him to live ... perhaps it would have been a little relief to her if he had died. She always felt a mixture of anguish in her love for him.' After William's death the mother does not wake up from her grief until Paul almost dies of pneumonia, after her sustained ignoring of the boy's efforts to comfort her (p.171 ff.). Paul's replacement of William is portrayed rather morbidly in his going out to dinner wearing the deceased's best suit, which fits perfectly and makes his mother's heart 'firm with pride and joy' (p.312). All his life Paul had been second to William, whom he saw as a rival; as a small boy William is active and lively, Paul is 'quiet and not noticeable' (p.75), eliminated by the hoydenish Annie: 'he always seemed to care for things if she wanted him to.' An introverted, hypersensitive child, he 'suffered very much from the first contact with anything' (p.112 ff.). When he was seven, the starting school had been a nightmare and a torture for him. At fourteen the same holds good for his first job when, before he even starts, he feels 'a prisoner of industrialism', taken into bondage and denied his freedom in the beloved home valley, feelings that are very much Lawrence's own: he hated industrialism. He embodies his own youth in Paul, and as we approach the second part of the novel the struggle with his mother and his first steps on the path of courtship are seen in more detail.

It does not take the reader long to detect in Miriam, the girl he meets at Willey Farm (p.159) while he is on a romantic outing with his mother, the first signs of Lawrence's 'spiritual witch'. In spite of her having grown up on the farm, she does not dare to put forward

her hand to the hens, afraid of the feel of such living creatures. She is not 'a common girl' but recites poetry all day and dreams of being a 'grand person', like the 'Lady of the Lake', whereas Paul, being new there and normally shy, shrinks at nothing. To create the character of Miriam, Lawrence drew upon his experiences with Jessie Chambers, one of his closest friends in his adolescence and early manhood. As Niven comments on her portrayal as Miriam ⁵:

Though Miriam is partly based on Jessie Chambers, who was offended by this portrayal of her relationship with Lawrence, she often seems in the novel less a creature of flesh and blood than a 'literary' prototype, platonic and allusive. She creates around herself a nun-like and romantic purity, giving herself to Paul more as an act of self-martyrdom than in a spirit of sexual partnership. Her instincts attract her to figures in history and to saints in paintings.

This reminds us of Helena in *The Trespasser*, whose portrayal surpasses the here and now: 'For centuries a certain type of woman has been rejecting the "animal" in humanity'. We have seen that Lawrence came to this idea of time-perspective through his study of Thomas Hardy. The latter described the character of Sue in his novel *Jude the Obscure* as 'a product of civilization'; 'one of the women of some grand old civilization, whom I used to read about in my bygone, wasted, classical days'ⁱⁱⁱ. Lawrence feels sympathy for her predicament, because he sees it as stored up for her in history; thus he seems to be doing more than giving a mere historical explanation. He is offering implicit recompense for his treatment of Emily in *The White Peacock*, Helena in *The Trespasser* and especially Miriam in *Sons and Lovers*. Jessie Chambers, who became Mrs Wood in 1915, wrote her side of the Lawrence story in *D.H. Lawrence: A Personal Record* (1935). This is an interesting picture of the young Lawrence who used to visit her at The Haggs farm and whom she saw for the last time just before he went to Germany with Frieda Weekley in the spring of 1912.

Miriam is presented, far more than Emily or Helena, as a pious nun in the making, fantasizing about the courtly love so held high in her day and age. The girl is romantic in her soul; 'everywhere was a Walter Scott heroine being loved by men with helmets or with plumes in their caps' (p.177). Like her mother, she is 'inclined to be mystical, such women as treasure religion inside them, breathe it in their nostrils, and see the whole of life in a mist thereof.' To Paul she seems 'always, always sad', even her joy is like a flame coming off of

⁵ See endnote ii, p.37+39

sadness (p.189). He hates 'her soul', the pious intensity of her emotions; she can never be 'ordinary' and is 'physically afraid' (p.191):

She might have been one of the women who went with Mary when Jesus was dead. Her body was not flexible and living. She walked with a swing, rather heavily, her head bowed forward, pondering. She was not clumsy, and yet none of her movements seemed quite *the* movement. Often, when wiping the dishes, she would stand in bewilderment and chagrin because she had pulled in two halves a cup or a tumbler. It was as if, in her fear and self-mistrust, she put too much strength in her effort. There was no looseness or abandon about her. Everything was gripped stiff with intensity, and her effort, overcharged, closed in on itself.

She is not only physically afraid, gripping Paul's hands when she has to climb over a turnstile or jumping from even the smallest height, she is afraid of sensual emotions, too.

Paul is denied the joy she feels at his presence, for fear he might think she wants him, and she prays to God not to let her love him (p.212). She is prepared to be God's sacrifice, but not Paul's or 'her own'. She has been brought up with her mother's Victorian ideas of sexuality: all her life, Miriam's mother has said to her that 'there is one thing in life that is always dreadful, but you have to bear it' (p.355).

In Lawrence's days young people grew up with the notion that sexuality was something shameful. Paul is very self-conscious in his attempts to approach Miriam sexually, and this is not only because of her piety. Before he could even kiss her he 'must drive something out of himself', for which he sometimes hates Miriam (p.256). At the same time he is not sensitive to her and does not reward her shy attempts to impress him. Still, he is aware of his own shortcomings, too. Deep-down he loves her and would have given his head to have felt a joyous desire to marry her, but cannot bring it off because of impediments instilled in him by Victorian morals (p.341):

A good many of the nicest men he knew were like himself, bound in by their own virginity, which they could not break out of. They were so sensitive to their women that they would go without them forever rather than do them a hurt, an injustice. Being the sons of mothers whose husbands had blundered rather brutally through their feminine sanctities, they were themselves too diffident and shy. They could easier deny themselves than incur any reproach from a woman; for a woman was like their mother, and they were full of the sense of their mother. They preferred themselves to suffer the misery of celibacy, rather than risk the other person.

In spite of her unfavourable and even hurtful portrayal as a lover, Miriam plays a crucial role in Paul's life as a young man. She is his main stimulus in developing his artistic talents: 'A sketch finished, he always wanted to take it to Miriam ... in contact with Miriam he gained insight' (p.196). She is also important to the development of Paul's mind, holds 'the key to his soul'. At this time Paul is beginning to question the orthodox creed, and Miriam's view of religion is crucial to him: 'Miriam was the threshing floor on which he threshed out all his beliefs' (p.279). They share something very fundamental in this; 'And what he realized, she realized. She felt he could not do without her.' Moreover, he loves Willey Farm and its inhabitants, all this besides Miriam. Having grown up in a disrupted family and an industrial atmosphere, Paul finds family life at Willey Farm a healing experience. Miriam's brother Edgar is a close friend of his, and he loves the natural scenery of its surroundings: 'He loved the family so much, he loved the farm so much; it was the dearest place on earth to him. His home was not so lovable' (p.277).

Their relationship fails because of sexual barriers, a deficiency to which both partners contribute. If Miriam is a prude, so is Paul: 'he would not have it that they were lovers', their intimacy is so abstract and 'all thought and weary struggle into consciousness' (p.213). Paul is not an example of tenderness. At times he is most unfeeling and hard to Miriam, as in the instance when he is helping her with algebra (p.194). It is safer for him to see their togetherness as a platonic friendship; the fact that 'he might want her as a man wants a woman had in him been suppressed into a shame' (p.220/1). It is in a scene in the moonlight that Paul gets to this realization, and in Lawrence's symbolism this involves a strong hold of female power over the male. Paul's feelings are sexual deep down, but they become impotent at Miriam's ignoring them, and turn into 'some religious state' instead: 'I am so damned spiritual with *you* always!' he cries (p.232). He is too much overruled by Miriam's soulful hold on him; 'she always seemed absorbed in him, and by him' (p.216). 'She wants to absorb him', says Mrs Morel (p.237), which, coming from her, arouses suspicion of Freudian jealousy. Her reproach of Miriam that she will make him her ward, 'he will never be a man on his own feet - she will suck him up' is the pot calling the kettle black. 'The author seems bent on showing Miriam to be possessive', says Philip Hobsbaum⁶, whereas, as he puts it, the comments made on their relationship by Paul's mother evince a considerably more damaging possessiveness. It is for the reader to decide whose influence is strongest in having brought about Paul's feelings of insubstantiality (p.240): his mother's possessiveness or Miriam's refined sexual timidity. In

⁶ See endnote iii, p.49

the final stages of the novel Lawrence tries to do justice to Miriam by making Paul realize how important she has always been for his artistic development. Going through his sketchbook he feels again Miriam's interest in his work, which 'at the same time is in himself' (p.504), and he sees how unfair he has been to her: 'She had borne so long the cruelty of belonging to him and not being claimed by him' (p.507). It finally dawns upon Paul that their courtship falters because their sexual inadequacy prevents them from becoming 'mates': 'he could not bear it - that breast which was warm and which cradled him without taking the burden of him' (p.508).

At the time of writing of *Sons and Lovers* Lawrence had eloped with Frieda Weekley, whose sensuality amazed him, and who opened a new world for him. She was able to tell him about Freud, and even though Lawrence later reacted strongly against his theories he was able to think about the whole matter in a new way, claiming that the novel had a general cultural significance, calling it 'a great tragedy the tragedy of thousands of young men in England'ⁱⁱⁱ. In Freud's conception several neurotic fixations, sexual inhibitions and feelings of guilt can be traced back to an unresolved Oedipus complex. Freud's theory was inspired by Sophocles's tragedy in which Oedipus, without knowing, kills his father and marries his mother. It is a universal developmental phase, and in the traditional Freudian view the conflict may be partly resolved if the child identifies positively with the parent of the same gender. It could even completely be resolved if that parent were to be 'rediscovered' in another sexually full-grown and mature 'object'. Several scenes seem to be in the story mainly to convey Oedipal notions. In the scene with Morel in the bathtub it is obvious his son cannot identify with him: 'It seemed strange they were the same flesh' (p.243) though Paul's presence at the occasion is otherwise artificial. After her jealous fault-finding with Miriam and undue criticism of Paul's friendship with her one would hardly expect Gertrude to be the objective, therapeutic listener she is when Paul is telling her about his trouble with women, feeling that he cannot love and thus wrongs them (p.426).

Various scenes in the novel convey the relationship between Paul and Gertrude more like that of lovers than of mother and son. When the two go to Willey Farm together his admiration of her new blouse has a sensuous connotation: 'Oh, my stars!' he exclaimed, 'What a bobby-dazzler!' (p.152). In a conversation when his mother is trying to interfere with his friendship with Miriam he submits to her: 'Instinctively he realized that he was life to her. And, after all, she was the chief thing to him, the only supreme thing' (p.261). 'He was at peace because he still loved his mother best' (p.264). The love for his mother is not sexual, though. He sees sex as 'a detached thing', that does not belong to a woman. 'Sex has become

so complicated for him that he would have denied that he ever could want Clara or Miriam or any woman whom he *knew*' (p.337). Yet with Clara he is able to enjoy sex, and this is to initiate 'the defeat of Miriam', implying that she is the one who is responsible for the sterility of her courtship with Paul. Among literary critics there is an overall feeling that Clara has been brought in for the character Paul's convenience; that she is an agent to forward the plot rather than a necessary development of the book. The fact that both Gertrude and Miriam welcome her presence is not very convincing. It is entirely out of character for a moralistic woman like Gertrude to approve of her son's involvement with a married woman. Clara serves to present a safe option for Paul; her being married reduces Paul's feelings of infidelity to his mother. And for a chaste girl like Miriam to provide her suitor with a sexual object is not very likely, either, even though for her, too, Clara serves a purpose. Miriam introduces her to Paul in the hope that he will discover for himself the unrewarding nature of a merely sexual encounter, a realization which Miriam thinks will bring him back to her, 'tired of his new sensation' (p.364). Clara is the opposite of Miriam. Not a lady, she is perfectly amiable, but indifferent, hard (p.280 ff.). Separated from her husband, she is free and independent, hostile towards men: "'if she looks at a man she says haughtily "Nevermore"', thus presenting a challenge to Paul's immature manliness. Being a 'suffragette, and so on' (p.382) she is above Victorian morals, and people's gossip will not hurt her. Clara plays a role in Paul's life in the Freudian sense of helping to resolve his mother-fixation. After they have made love for the first time (p.379 ff.), Paul is happy, 'his eyes were shining, his face seemed to glow' and for once he talks the broad dialect of his father: for once he 'identifies positively' with him.

It may be because of this experience that he also has 'a peculiar feeling of intimacy' (p.415) for Baxter Dawes, Clara's husband. In many ways the opposite of Paul, he is more like Morel; a coarse-grained workman, 'evidently on the downward track'. In spite of their animosity, there is a mutual interest to become friends. With Paul being disappointed in Miriam's piety and gradually tiring of Clara's passion, his friendship with a male offers him a substitute. In *Women in Love* Lawrence portrays male friendship in Birkin and Gerald, the former wanting 'Blutbruderschaft'. The fight between Paul and Baxter prefigures a fight between Gerald and Birkin, and in both cases Lawrence hints at a sense of 'naked selves' (p.462) and 'the elementary man' in each. In the instance of Paul and Baxter the two are 'deadly rivals' over Clara, even though they never mention her (p.467). In their opposition they even feel a connection in which they turn against Clara: 'both men hated her for her composure' (p.492). Baxter ends up in a convalescent home, with implied guilt on Clara's part: her having left him has brought him down, and she now offers recompense by going

back to him, to 'make restitution' and sacrifice herself in looking after him. But this is not her only motive. Like Morel, Baxter is more instinctive and more open, less intellectual than Paul, who has a certain coldness, a 'detached criticism' of Clara. This puts her off; she sees it as disrespectful. Clara sees Baxter's love as more genuine; she prefers his downright rudeness to Paul's reserve.

Paul does not reach his 'consummation' in *Sons and Lovers*. Not with Miriam, who is, most unfairly, 'put to the test' which of course she fails, as making love is inconceivable as a test. She 'would let him have her if he insisted' even though she expects him to be disappointed afterwards and leave her (p.347). She is making a sacrifice of herself 'like a creature awaiting immolation' (p.354), and Paul, though 'initiated', only feels a 'dull pain in his soul', to the extent that death and the after-life are consoling thoughts. His courtship with Clara does not fulfil him either; Paul feels 'a naked hunger' for her, yet is 'stifled' by their passion, as stifled as by Miriam's refraining from it. It heals his sexual repression, but does not lead to a union (p.439). In the portrayal of their mutual feelings Lawrence takes the first step in the direction of 'impersonal love', which he is to work out into detail in his later novels *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. 'Paul and Clara meet in a kind of powerful, healing love which reinstates the male or female in each', says Richard Swigg⁷ in his study of the novel. Paul comes to realize there is a life apart from his mother - his sexual life, even though this does not make him independent: he has to conceal it from her. 'Then sometimes he hated her' (p.420): he realizes he will not be able to fully give himself to a woman as long as she is alive: 'And I never shall meet the right woman while you live' (p.427). As a child Paul symbolically burnt his sister's doll; in the end he and his sister conspire again in the mercy-killing of their mother by crushing an overdose of morphia pills in the dying woman's milk (p.479). After her death Paul is utterly and completely lonely, yet at the same time strong enough not to give in to despair: 'He would not take that direction, to the darkness, to follow her. He walked towards the faintly humming, glowing town, quickly' (p.511).

Both Gertrude and Paul are caught in their unhealthy attachment to each other. To Lawrence his mother's death marked the beginning of a new life for him. He eloped with Frieda, the woman who divorced her first husband Ernest Weekley and left her children for him. She was his partner for the rest of his life. 'Once a man establishes a full dynamic communication at the deeper and the higher centres, with a woman, this can never be broken' Lawrence says in his dissertation *Fantasia of the Unconscious*^{iv}, which was first published in

⁷ See endnote viii, p.53

1923. All his work shows a lifelong interest in matters of love, sex and marriage, for which his own life as seen in *Sons and Lovers* has provided the basis.

ⁱ Anthony Beal: D.H.Lawrence: Selected Literary Criticism. (Heinemann, 1961) p.13

ⁱⁱ Richard Swigg: Lawrence, Hardy, and American Literature. (Oxford University Press, 1972) p.74

ⁱⁱⁱ Stephen Spender: D.H. Lawrence: Novelist, Poet, Prophet (Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973) p.81

^{iv} D.H. Lawrence: Fantasia of the Unconscious / Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious. (William Heinemann Ltd, 1961.) p.123.