

A Portrait of a Woman: A Study in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* And Some of His Selected Short Poems

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Abstract

A fictional work is, sometimes a resemblance of the personal life of its author. This is especially can be said on D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* which its autobiographical elements are easy to identify. The most well known instance of this is the novel's heroine, Gertrude Morel whose character is based upon Lawrence's mother, Lydia.

This research, which follows the psycho-analysis approach in analyzing one of *Sons and Lovers* characters, sheds light on Gertrude Morel, the wife and the mother, in addition to some of Lawrence's "mother" poems that help in drawing a full portrait of Gertrude Morel or its double Lydia Lawrence.

Introduction

David Herbert Lawrence is an English novelist, a poet, a critic and a painter. He was one of the most outstanding literary figures of the twentieth century in a sense that he left his imprint on the English literature in general and on the modern one in particular. For a long time, debates continue to characterize discussion of his life and work. Different people have different opinions. Some said that Lawrence's novels are

known for Oedipal anxieties and descriptions of sexual relationships, some other said that they are dealing with the struggle for human fulfillment within a dehumanizing industrialized society. What so ever they can be , they are about human's relationships in general.

D. H. Lawrence was born in 1885 in the poor, coal-mining town of Eastwood, Nottingham shire, England. His father was a coal miner and a heavy drinker. His mother, Lydia Beardsall Lawrence was a former schoolteacher strong-willed, refined middle class lady. She was greatly superior in education to her husband.

Poverty and the friction that marked his separated parents dominated Lawrence's childhood. Yet he was highly encouraged by his mother who brought him up and his brothers within her circle: a circle from which his father was excluded. Her love drove itself in two directions: she hated her husband and, just as extravagantly, she loved her children.¹

Lawrence shared his mother a unique sensuous bond that affected him deeply. The critic Fiona Becket argues that Lawrence loved his mother and cared deeply about what she thought him as a man and as an artist.² He was completely possessed by her to the level he could not establish any love affair during her lifetime. This is what he admitted of to his friend Jessie Chambers. Lawrence said of his mother that she bore him, loved him, kept him, and his love turned back into her, so that he could not be free to go forward with his own life, really love another woman.³ In spite of that he helped her death when he gave her an overdose of a sleeping medicine. He could not bear her suffering. He, in fact reached to a highest

level of giving up and despair. His poem “The End”, depicts how he suffered moral paralysis in confronting his mother suffering:

***And oh, my love as I rock for you tonight
And have not any longer any hope
To heal the suffering, or make requite
For all your life of asking and despair,
I own that some of me is dead to-night***⁴

Lawrence successes both as a novelist and as a poet. He rewrote many of his novels and his poems not at once but several times. The reason behind that was to give them a narrative coherence. He explained that when he said that he ordered them to reveal his inner history and his essential autobiography.⁵

Sons and Lovers as an autobiographical novel

D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* was sparked by the death of Lawrence’s mother Lydia. Lawrence’s third novel reexamined his childhood, his relationship with his mother, and her psychological effect on his life. In fact “ Lawrence’s history of his own life is the history of *Sons and Lovers*”.⁶

There are so many parallels between this novel and its characters and Lawrence’s life. Lydia, for example, becomes Gertrude Morel, the intellectually stifled, and unhappy mother who lives through and for her sons. Gertrude’s relationship with her sons is the core of Sigmund Freud’s notion of the Oedipus complex, which Lawrence was aware of. Becket suggests that *Sons and Lovers* was immediately received as a “Freudian novel” which gives a vivid representation of the mother-father-son triangle.⁷

Possession is one of the key words of this faithful autobiographical novel. Possession in *Sons and Lovers* is the desire of holding or having something as one's own or under one's control. There are many strong possessions in this novel. The strongest one that brings much destruction to relationships is that one of a very unhappy woman and a dominating mother, who shows a great success in winning the hearts and minds of her children in general, and her sons in particular.

Gertrude Morel the unhappily married woman

Once Lawrence wrote to a friend describing his ill mother: "you see mother has had a devilish married life, for nearly forty years—and this is the conclusion—no relief".⁸ This devilishly married life was mainly because of the emotional and the cultural gap that separated his father from his mother: "she still had her high moral sense, inherited from generations of Puritans".⁹ Therefore, She tries to reform the bad qualities of her husband:

She fought to make him undertake his own responsibilities, to make him fulfill his obligations. But he was too different from her. His nature was purely sensuous, and she strove to make him moral, religious (*S. A. L.*, p.14).¹⁰

Being too different from each other was the basis of their problems as it could be the reason behind their attraction to each other before marriage: "She was to the miner that thing of mystery and fascination, a lady, when she spoke to him, it was with a southern pronunciation and a purity of English which thrilled him to hear" (*S. A. L.*, p.9). Her pure Southern pronunciation is not the only outstanding features of her

personality. She, in addition, “ had a curious, receptive mind”. “She was clever in leading folk to talk. She loved ideas, and she was considered very intellectual. What she liked most of all was an argument on religion or philosophy or politics with some educated man”. This, in fact, may make one wonder if she liked all these things so why she married Walter Morel?. For her he was a wonderful man, and she “ never having met anyone like him.” Her personality was built upon morality and moral values , therefore mining was “ a new tract of life suddenly opened before her. She realized that life of the miners, hundreds of them toiling below earth and coming up at evening, is hard. He seemed to her noble....She looked at him, with a touch of appeal in her pure humility” (*S. A. L.*, p.11) . She thinks he is strong and full of animation. His voice sounds comic grotesque.

After their marriage everything turned around. “She felt lonely with him now”. She “despised her husband”. “He had begun to neglect her; the novelty of his own home was gone. He had no grit” .

Lawrence believed that the relation of marriage between a man and a woman, is the necessary basis of the new order of society and in order to make this relation creative and not destructive it is necessary for the man to be at the age of maturity which provides him with a sense of scared responsibility in order to have a deep insight of the future. If this sense of responsibility is not found in the man then the love –craving of the woman will become frenzied and lay waste the family.¹¹ Lack of feeling of responsibility on the part of Walter Morel towards his family is the main reason that

repelled Mrs. Morel. "It galled her bitterly to think he should be out taking his pleasure and spending his money, whilst she remained at home harassed" (*S. A. L.*, p.18). The critic John Murry states that Mrs. Morel's creative step consisted simply in taking responsibility for his children, in being in act, not merely in a name, a father, in becoming a man whom his wife must respect and could not despise.¹² What happened was completely different and completely the opposite. She began to despise him and "The world seemed a dreary place, where nothing else would happen for her—at least until William grew up. But for herself, nothing but this dreary endurance—till the children grew up" (*S. A. L.*, p.5).

Her relation with her husband turned to be much like a battle and

Lawrence dramatizes this relationship in the early chapters of *Sons and Lovers* and in his poem "Discord in childhood":

"Outside the house an ash-tree hung its terrible whips,
And at night when the wind arose, the lash of tree
Shrieked and slashed the wind, as a ship's
Weird rigging in a storm shrieks hideously
Within the house two voices arose in anger, a slender lash
Whistling delirious rage, and the dreadful sound
Of a thick lash booming and bruising, until it drowned
the other voice in a silence of blood,neath the noise of the ash"

Lawrence's poem dramatizes one of a husband and a wife battles. The poem has two settings and each of the two is a counter part to the other. The stormy weather outside the house depicts the stormy atmosphere inside the house.

John Middleton Murry suggests “The truer memory of the ash- tree is in the prose of *Sons and Lovers*.¹³:

In front of the house there was a huge old ash-tree. The west Wind, sweeping from Derbyshire, caught the houses with Full force, and the tree shrieked again.... The man’s voice Got higher. And then the whole was drowned in a piercing Medley of shrieks and cries from the great, wind-swept ash Tree. The children lay silent in suspense, waiting for a lull In the wind to hear what their father was doing. He might Hit their mother again. There was a feeling of horror,... The wind came through the tree fiercer and fiercer. All the Cords of the great harp hummed whistled, and shriek. And Then came the horror of the sudden silence everywhere, out Side and downstairs what was it? Was it a silence of blood (S. A. L., p.60).

Usually any woman is in need for a man who does not only love her but who also gives her feelings of safety, peace, and protection. All these things are really what Mrs. Morel lacks in her marriage. She needs her man’s protection and love. Lawrence in his poem “Love in the Farm” is the mouthpiece of womenfolk and he presents a picture of a man who gathers a dominate power and love:

I hear his hand on the latch, and rise from the chair
Watching the door open; he flashes bare
His strong teeth in a smile and flashes his eyes
In a smile like triumph upon me; then careless-wise
He flings the rabbit soft on the table board
And comes towards me: ah the uplifted sword
His coming! With his hand he turns my face to him
And caresses me with his finger that still smell grim
I know not what fine wire is round my throat;

I only know I let him finger there
And down his mouth comes to my mouth and down
His bright dark eyes comes over me, like a hood
Upon my mind! his lips meet mine, and a flood
Of sweet fire sweeps a cross me, so I drown
Against him, die and find death good

Through this poem one may estimate what Mrs. Morel is really in need for. She is just like a flower that is in usual need for water in order to keep its smell. Mrs. Morel needs to be watered all the time. Her feelings, her emotions, her needs, and her desires are all in a usual need for being watered in order to keep on the smell of her love for her husband. Being neglected by her husband dries her emotion towards him. This makes her begin to look for someone who will compensate her. She turns to her children to get her compensation. Lawrence believes that love is the proper connection between a man and a woman ,and if there is no such connection, man wastes himself while woman makes lover of her son.¹⁴ Thus when Mrs. Morel looses such a bond between her and her husband "She throws herself into a last great love for her son". She wants to escape from poverty but she has to struggle with poverty and ugliness and meanness in her every day life . she always expects her sons onward and upward out of the coal-mining village, so that they find themselves in a higher class and make a better life.

Mrs. Morel the dominating, and the selfish mother

Mrs. Morel, the mother, is one of the most memorable mothers in all of western literature. “by blatantly polishing Lydia’s halo D. H. Lawrence managed to create twentieth century literature’s most memorable portrait of mother love”.¹⁵ She is both a giving selfless nurturer of her children and a possessive tyrant.

This small resolute woman with her luxuriant hair and the grim determined mouth is the axis from which her children, particularly William and Paul spin out into life. She instills them with self-confidence, and social and intellectual ambitions.

Mrs. Morel is a fascinating compound of faults and virtues. Her virtues are hard work, thriftiness and, most importantly, possessing exception intelligence and strength of will. Gertrude Morel devotes herself passionately to her children, especially her sons, seeking to it that they have every advantage; she can give them, making the most of her talents with which they find themselves, into a higher class, and a better life.

Her children warship her. They see her with no demerits: “Nothing she ever did, no movement she ever made, could have been found fault with by her children”(S. A. L., p.66). Her sons, in fact, look to her as a goddess.

Life with all its unhappy conditions couldn’t defeat her . Still her face and “the mouth closed tight from suffering and disillusion and self-denial, and her nose the smallest bit on one side, and her blue eyes so young, quick and warm, made her heart contract with love.”(S. A. L., p.66). All the time she is

brave and full of life. She, in fact, finds in her sons a spark that kindles her desire to go on with life. Though she finds her solace in her children, she feels sorry when she knows that she is pregnant for "both economic reasons and because she did not love her husband" but not because of the "infant"

A deep and a firm bond is created between Mrs. Morel and her children. She succeeds in making her children appreciate her struggle with life. she succeeds in making them believe that she is living for their sake not for her sake. This resulted in the way her children begin to think of her: "It hurt the boy keenly, this feeling about her state that she never had her life's fulfillment: his own incapability to make up to her hurt him with a sense of importance, yet made him patiently dogged inside. It was his childish aim"(S. A. L., p. 66).

For her children she becomes the mother and the beloved: "Paul loved to sleep with his mother. Sleep is still most perfect, in spite of hygienists when it is shared with a beloved" (S. A. L., p.67). The fact that Mrs. Morel or Lydia is the beloved occupies many of Lawrence's short poems. He keeps on calling his mother the lover , the beloved, and the bride. Lawrence's poem "The Bride" addresses his dead mother in her coffin clothes. Metaphorically his dead mother with her white clothes in the coffin is just like a bride in her nuptial white dress

My love looks like a girl to-night,
But she is old

.....

..., she sleeps like a bride, and dreams her dreams,
and her death mouth sings"

Mrs. Morel's children, but more specifically William, are the only bright spot in her frustrated life. As a result she lavishes all of her love and attention to her sons: "She was a woman who waited for her children to grow up. And William occupied her chiefly"(S. A. L.,p.68). She becomes the center of her children life. she makes them grow up within her circle from which her husband and their father is completely excluded: "He was shut out from all family affairs. No one told him anything. The children, alone with their mother, told her all about the day's happenings, everything. Nothing had really taken place them until it was told to their mother" (S. A. L.,p.62)

William is the older among Mrs. Morel's children and he, for her, becomes the first one who compensates her and makes "the world glow again for her". "She saw him a man, young, full of vigor" (S. A. L., p.47). Though she encourages him to go to London, she is greatly saddened by his leaving. William is the closer to herself and she is worried that he may turn out to be like his father, drinking and socializing too much.

She shares him a strong bond, therefore, she has the ability to sense anything wrong happens to him in London. Her heart is heavy and anxious as "She could feel him losing himself" .

Her selfishness and jealousy appear clearly in her way of treating William's woman. He tries to persuade her that he loves the woman whom he has chosen and she on the other hand tries to persuade him of the opposite. She says: "Nothing is as bad as a marriage that's a hopeless failure. Mine was bad

enough, God knows, and ought to teach you something”(S. A. L., P.132). She asks her son to remember that there are worse wrongs than breaking off an engagement. she insists that this woman “is not worthy of his love”. In fact Mrs. Morel has a battle against this woman and she gains triumph when she has “him to herself again”.

One morning Mrs. Morel gets a telegram from London. William is ill. Mrs. Morel goes to Elmers End where William lives. There he lays on his death bed. Like any mother she settles down to “nurse” her son and she prays for him, she prays that “he would recognize her”. Useless are all her prayers. “At two O’clock, in a dreadful paroxysm, he died”.(S. A. L.,p. 136).

After William’s death, Mrs. Morel notices “nothing” and says “nothing”. She is paralyzed with grief She seems unaware of anything. She seems “small, white, and mute”. In fact she loses her “interest in life” but this does not destroy her power. she gathers her resolution when Paul becomes ill. Paul’s illness makes her life begin to root itself to him. In fact Paul’s illness has an effect of a vibrating bell that trembles her mind and her heart. She says to herself “I should have watched the living, not the dead”(S. A. L. , p. 140).

A new bond is created between the mother and another boy of her sons. It is Paul: “He realized her. His whole will rose up and arrested him. He put his head on her breast, and took ease of her love”(S. A. L. , p.141” . This time Mrs. Morel is ready to lose anything but not Paul. The Critic Som Deva asserts : “Paul stands in the Web of the same as a helpless fly, and the mother, Mrs. Morel plays the spider”¹⁶.

This fly in fact loves to be prisoned within the net of its spider. In reading Lawrence's poems concerning motherhood, one may feel the presence of his mother. One may feel how he means to talk about her. For him, she was the only one in his heart until her death and even after that. In his poem "The End" he expresses his desire to carry her inside his heart and inside his soul. It is as if he wants to pour her inside himself:

If I could have put you in my heart
If I could have wrapped you in my self,
How glad I should have been...

Mrs. Morel's bond with Paul seems to be stronger than that with William. Paul himself is possessed by her more than William. His Mother is "The strongest tie in his life". In fact she is "the pivot and the pole of his life, from which he could not escape"(S. A. L. , p.222).

For Mrs. Morel Paul is what life left for her and she is not ready to loose him: "William was dead. She would fight to keep Paul" . Therefore her bond with Paul is not a usual one: "Whatever he did she felt her soul stood by him, ready, as it were, to hand him his tools. She could not bear it when he was with Miriam"(S. A. L., p.222).

Mrs. Morel stands as a solid obstacle between Paul and Miriam. She ties Paul with a strong rope. She makes him feel that her hold is the only place all over the world that stand solid and does not melt into unreality . He tries many times to "fight against his mother" but he usually "comes back to her " with feelings of "satisfaction" and "self-sacrifice" because he is faithful to her. He usually tries to persuade his mother that he

does not love Miriam: "I do like to talk to her- I never said I didn't. but I don't love her" (S. A. L. , p.212).

The relationship between Mrs. Morel and Paul is not of an ordinary mother and a son. Sometimes one may feel as if she is a jealous wife not a mother. The Critic Harold Bloom assumes that: "In December 1910 a letter written while his mother was dying, Lawrence had said of the relationship with his mother: "We have loved each other, almost with a husband and wife love, as well as filial and maternal""¹⁷. The mother uses the full weight of her powerful influence to prevent her son from offering love to any woman. In other words, all the time Paul's mind belong to his mother, so that he cannot live with his own one. His intense attachment to his mother keeps him from properly loving any other woman.

Both of the mother and her son carry each other inside themselves. It seems as if the mother and her son are living with one soul, with one breath, but not with one body. A question may come to the mind, what about Paul, is he really happy with the web of his spider? Is he really happy with his jail? Does he really want to be prisoned within the circle of the sick selfish love of his mother?. The answer for this question may be found or at least can be estimated from Lawrence's following poem:

And so, my love, my mother
I shall always be true to you
Twice I am born, my dearest,
To life, and death, in you

From these lines one may feel the domination of this mother. First of all he calls her “my love” then he calls her “my mother”. For him she is the beloved and the mother. What kind of a woman this mother can be!? He couldn’t be released from her prison until her death which brings a new beginning to his life. In fact along her life she is for her sons the mother, the beloved, and the prison wherein she keeps them.

In the next stanza of the same poem, the story of this mother reaches its end:

I kiss you good-bye, my darling,
Our ways are different now;
You are a seed in the night- time

.....
I kiss you good-bye, my dearest,
It is finished between us here

Death all the time comes to release the sons from this mother. It firstly takes William and then it takes her. Death at last accomplishes what life could not contrive to do. It helps Paul to be free from his mother’s imprisoning love. Stewart argues that “After Lydia’s death Lawrence’s world fell apart but if the young man was desolate at his loss then the artist inside him capitalized on the emotions his mother’s death evoked”.¹⁸

Death is stronger than the domination of this mother. Death comes to give Paul his will and to take his mother’s one. This concept of giving and taking was wrongly understood by this mother. She gives her sons much but on the other hand she

does not know what to take from them. She gives them life but later on she kidnapped their rights of life and love.

Conclusion

Mrs. Morel is a tragic character who is stuck in an unhappy marriage and gets remedy through her devotion to her sons. She fights bitterly against life and finally she dies of cancer.

All through her life, she keeps on struggling in all kinds of battles restlessly. She fights against her husband in a battle for dignity. She fights against poverty which she wants to escape from. She fights against the ugliness and meanness of her everyday life. Her battles make her feel lonely . she feels that she is miles away from her husband. She feels that there is no bridge between her and Mr. Morel. She feels that she hates him. Her life with her husband is as if she is "buried alive". She attempts to offset her husband from her life through living for and by her sons in whom she must find herself. She redirects her attention to her children.

Love and hate are two of many concepts that control humankind. For Mrs. Morel love and hate are her destiny. These two contradict feelings are the cause of tragedy of *Sons and Lovers* . These two contradict feelings are fighting each other inside herself. She hates her life with her husband, but she loves her life with her children. Her battles turn to be against her son's girlfriends. She fights against them when they challenge her possession of her sons' love for her. she makes every effort to retain it in a battle for love. Her sons are her victims. They become tormented and pulled to pieces by their

mother's inner struggle of contradicting feelings. They are victims of her over love . They are victims of her selfishness. They are victims of her domination. She herself is the victim of lacking of love which she spends her life looking for it.

Notes

- 1 Harry T. Moor, *The Priest of Love: A Life of D. H. Lawrence* (U. S. A., Carbondale Southern University Press, 1977), p.11.
- 2 Fiona Becket, *The Complete Critical Guide to D. H. Lawrence* (London, Rutledge Press, 2002),p.45.
- 3 F. B. Pinion, *D. H. Lawrence Companion* (U. K, Macmillan press, 1985), p. 40.
- 4 D. H. Lawrence, *Collected Poems* (U. S. A, New York, 1929), p.116. (All further quoted poems are from this edition).
- 5 Pinion, p.52.
- 6 John Middleton Murry, *Son of Woman: The Story of D. H. Lawrence* (London, 1931), p.20.
- 7 Becket, p.44.
- 8 Quoted in George Panichan "Voyage of Oblivion" in *Critics on D. H. Lawrence* (New Delhi, Universal Book press, 1996), p.117.
- 9 Murry, p. 25.
- 10 D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* (London, Heinemann press, 1974) (All further quoted passages are from this edition.)
- 11 Murry, p. 19.
- 12 Ibid., p. 29.

13Ibid., 27.

14 Quoted in Becket, p.47.

15 Mauree Stewart, "D. H. Lawrence and His Mother" in *The English Novel in the Twentieth Century*, Vol:269, issue: 1567 (U. S. A, Gale Group, 2002), p.96.

16 Som Deva, *A Critical Study of Sons and Lovers- D. H. Lawrence* (India, Printry Press, 1988), p. 67.

17 Harold Bloom, *D. H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers* (New York, Chelsea House, 1988), p. 81.

18 Stewart, p. 97.