

Beyond a Phallic Imagination: A Critical Study of *Sons and Lovers*

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ABSTRACT

D.H. Lawrence was a prolific writer, his novel, Sons and Lovers written in 1913 is considered a semi-autobiographical work. The text depicts the theory of Freud and many critics have considered the text to be based on that theory but beyond this, some layers are to be explored and interpreted by the reader. The treatment of women, the plight of the mother, a semi-developed personality of a man, his quest to be whole and the jealous nature of the mother. The portrayal of women not in just the traditional aspects but also portrays the voice of the woman as well. The voice of mother who turned towards the son and contributed to his lack of development as a person. The inspiration from Thomas Hardy's works can also be seen. The paper aims to interpret the layers and deconstruct them further.

INTRODUCTION

Sons and Lovers, written by David Herbert Lawrence, which was first published in 1913, displays many complex human life qualities. The novel is based on the realistic elements of the time when it was written yet surpasses these times as the novel is written in such a manner that there can be a multitude of interpretations drawn from it and the author has painted such a beautiful picture in front of us that the novel can be seen in many lights which paints a poetic image in front of us as well. The love depicted in the novel knows no bounds and is consuming the lover in such a manner that the identity is lost in every aspect. Although, Paul has been accused by many critics for his semi-developed personality but the mother is the one who has contributed to this. The elements of the novel have been elaborated further in the paper.

The novel depicts the oedipal relationship with the Jocasta complex, and here we can see how they go hand in hand. At the time when D.H. Lawrence was writing this novel, the field of psychoanalysis was still in development and here we can see how these things are taking their shape in terms of the relationship between the son and the mother.

The very first pun that is there in the novel is in the name 'Morel' itself, one can say that the family of Morels lacks morals, this can be further elaborated by the depiction of Gertrude Coppard, "she was opposite. She had a curious, receptive mind...she loved ideas and was considered very intellectual . . ." (chapter 1), here, the depiction of Gertrude Morel is done in such a way that she is shown as a very intelligent woman with her favourite subjects as philosophy and religion but as soon as she gets married to Mr Morel, there is a sudden downfall in her personality. She changes from an intellectual being to someone who is just not thinking about her actions anymore. This soon manifests when the mother's obsession begins with the child. The mother forgets that she is a mother but rather starts to act like the lover and this can be seen when she is acquainted with Miriam and Clara. She starts to develop the feeling of jealousy and soon she starts to interfere in the relationships that the son has.

The novel begins with the ill-treatment of the mother, Gertrude Morel, the mother is being abused by the father. The tables turn after that where the mother develops the matriarchal household and becomes the dominant one in the house thereby, removing the father figure. The mother "turns to the child" and this can be seen when William is still a child, "at last Mrs Morel despised her husband. She turned to the child; she turned from the father" (chapter 1), the way D.H. Lawrence has stated it, he depicts the mistake, the same sentence is repeated twice showing that now the father figure is gone and it is still the beginning, Paul is not born as yet. This is also showing the emphasis that is there in their life. The absence of the father figure paves the way for the Jocasta complex and provides an environment where the father figure deteriorates further.

Also, the marriage of Gertrude and the disillusionment which is associated with Walter can be seen as well. The marriage didn't turn out the way she wanted it to be or the way she imagined and this led to the gap in the marriage and this is when the father was being cut off gradually from the household.

The absence of the father causes a ripple in the life of the Morels which further gives rise to the wave of the Oedipus complex and the reciprocation of those feelings by the mother which depicts the Jocasta complex. These can be seen throughout the novel as the mother has substituted Paul for her husband.

The instances of the novel have also depicted how the mother who was a person who is supposed to nourish the children is now the “succulent” figure in their life. The mother is sucking out the freedom and the freedom that the children need to develop their personality. She is never happy with Paul being with someone. Both Miriam and Clara which are opposite personalities have no significance in Paul’s life in actuality, the only person that Paul wanted was his mother with him till their time ends and the only girl who Mrs Morel wanted to see in his life was her.

Paul is never freed from the connection that he has with his mother, the umbilical cord or the string connected to his mother is so strong that his personality is unable to develop. When the child is in the womb, the mother is providing the nutrition to the child and the moment the child comes into this world the child is free to make his own decisions, but the emancipation of Paul has occurred at a very later stage but that is not the complete emancipation either. The personality of Paul was completely influenced by his mother that to become that free person he would have to re-live his entire life again.

Further, if the light has to be thrown on the situation of William, it can be seen how his wrong choices and his mother’s dominating nature affected his life. He too was his mother’s favourite son but he died. As he grows up there were many arguments between him and his mother. The mother is the one interfering in the relationships that sons have as she is jealous of the girls.

Trauma has also played a significant part in the novel. The psychoanalytic approach has always seen the root of the problem in childhood experiences. The moment Mr Morel cuts William’s hair it can be seen how the plot was now gaining a certain momentum. The cutting of hair could be seen as the castration fear as well. Walter Morel’s attempt to show how much domination he has in the household and how strong the father figure could be derived from this attempt, “But she knew, and Morel knew, that that act had caused something momentous to take place in her soul. She remembered the scene all her life, as one in which she had suffered the most intensely. ... he was an outsider to her” (pp.18, pp 65, Lawrence, D. H. *Sons and Lovers*. Collins Classics, 2010.)

The love that one has is supposed to nurture and the other one but, in the novel, the character of the mother is the one who is known to destroy their sons’ lives. She has absorbed them.

The moment William grows up, he is known to be handsome and he gets along with many girls. The mother does not like it as she says “I don’t approve of the girls my son meets at dances. And he is *not* at home.” (pp.61, Lawrence, D. H. *Sons and Lovers*. Collins Classics, 2010.)

“My lad,” she said, “they’re very wise. They know they’ve only got to flatter your vanity, and you press up to them like a dog that has its head scratched.”

“Well, they can’t go on scratching forever,” he replied. “And when they’ve done, I trot away.” (pp 65, Lawrence, D. H. *Sons and Lovers*. Collins Classics, 2010.)

The above lines show how William’s love is just momentary and he will move on just like that.

Upon reading the novel, the attempts of the father can be seen to assert his dominance over the household but they are useless as the central idea of the Oedipus complex does not leave anywhere. The mother and the child are connected and the father is bound to be cut off from the family and there is nothing that he can do about that. The trauma that one has gone through in their life holds power over humans and there is a way in which they can change but here the trauma worsens and interferes with their lives in such a manner where they are unable to recover. It can also be said how the mother is the one suffering the trauma repetitively as well. The series of events that are taking place in the novel depict the continued blows that she has taken and how she is trying to live a happy life through her sons.

The sons are unable to make their relationships strong and there Paul says, “And I never shall meet the right woman while you live” (pp.405, Lawrence, D. H. *Sons and Lovers*. Collins Classics, 2010) and it is true, the effects of the childhood trauma are such that he is never going to meet the one. Even though he meets two women in his life, he is at that position where he is unable to make the decision which is also a result of the semi developed personality.

The flowers hold a special place in the novel, the women in the novel have always been compared with the flowers. The flowers are known to represent femininity. The description of the women is in the terms of “Paul was treated to dazzling descriptions of all kinds of flower-like ladies, most of whom lived like cut blooms in William’s heart for a brief fortnight.” (pp 61, Lawrence, D. H. *Sons and Lovers*. Collins Classics, 2010) it signifies how the women are just there in his life for a very short period. Like a cut bloom survives for a few weeks, The relationship of the girls with

William was the same. The same is carried on with Paul as well, as he asks “why don’t I want to marry her or anybody? I feel sometimes as if I wronged my women, mother.” (pp. 405, Lawrence, D. H. *Sons and Lovers*. Collins Classics, 2010).

The poem “The sick rose” by William Blake can be juxtaposed with the novel as the marriage has acted like the “invisible worm” here, the moment Gertrude Coppard gets married to Mr. Morel, the ability to know that the relationship that is being established with the son is wrong is not there anymore. The love that a mother has for the son soon turns to the love that a person has for a lover. The mother is too occupied with her happiness here as the gap is established between what she wanted and what she got after she married Mr. Morel. This further can be elaborated with Mrs. Morel being the worm in the life of her children, the life which was supposed to be their own but the relationship that she establishes with them leads to their ruins as the mother-son relationship that they share has now completely absorbed the son, he has not developed his personality either.

The novel can also be seen in terms of existential crisis. It is that moment when the characters of the novel are questioning the value and the purpose of their lives. The questioning of Paul and the trauma and the chaos in the household tend to act as a catalyst and help in the metamorphosis of the personality as well.

Life in the Morel household can be seen as orderless, especially the life of Mrs. Morel, which she can feel to be completely lacking the order that she needs. She is trying to opt for the order that she needs and soon in that striving he destroys the lives of the people around her. The imperfect marriage affects the children. The interference can be seen in the lives of the people around her and soon she is trying to achieve that orderly state. The love that should be provided by her husband is now being provided by the child, the imbalance is trying to be restored with the help of various things that are around her. She is not thinking about the consequences that are going to be there. All she cares about is the balance.

The child tends to get the nourishment in the womb and when Paul was in the womb all Mrs Morel got was the neglect and the hatred of Mr. Morel. The moment she got married to Mr Morel it was as if the chaos did not leave her life, she was abused by Walter Morel and the need of the father to assert his dominance made him do the things that he should not have done.

The element can also be seen in terms of the questioning and the partial emancipation that takes place in the end. There seems to be not a pleasant ending to the novel. The death of the mother will always be there on Paul's back and will follow him wherever he goes although the hope is there for him. The way the mother has absorbed them has led to his personality not being developed. Although, the reader is not aware of what happens to Paul the existence that he has is now destroyed he does not know what is going on, he does not want to marry and he thinks about going back to Miriam but she was accepted into a college and soon he realises that there is nothing left after his mothers' death. He is thinking about what he should do with his life but he is unable to come to terms with it. This can also be seen as Paul's “quest to become whole” but he cannot become whole as the mother has not let his identity develop and thereby, he is questioning himself again and again and the quest continues. The moment the umbilical cord is cut is the moment Paul starts to feel incomplete.

This can also be equated with “*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*” by John Keats, where the obsession is highlighted. The obsession tends to take place and the moment the dame is gone the lover undergoes a spiritual death. Although Mrs. Morel is not a femme fatale but the obsession with the sons and is seen throughout the novel and the spiritual death that the lover goes is also depicted in the novel when Mrs. Morel dies and Paul is left alone.

The novel further also reminds us of Hamlet, who is also torn between his heart and mind. The pleasures of the body and the spiritual love can also be seen here when we have the entry of Clara and Miriam. The fleshly needs can be seen when Clara enters and spirituality is seen when Miriam enters. Their portrayal is done in such a manner that depicts how Paul is also torn between the two of them. He has three women in his life and with none of them he has that relationship that a person would share. He depicts how all his life he has always lived in the conflict of heart and mind and further in terms of sexual and spiritual.

D.H. Lawrence has always been known for exploring the themes of sexuality, inner conflict, sacrifice and the themes of psychology as well and before him, Thomas Hardy was the one who did that. Literary oeuvres of Thomas Hardy and Lawrence have talked about a lot of controversial things which were not accepted during that time.

Human nature has many colours to it and this has been depicted by both the writers in their respective manner. Both novelists are known to have gone beyond their literary period and signified many things in their work.

During the Victorian period, the morals were known to be conservative and many novelists wrote about society and soon this was also falling apart by the time the twentieth century began. There are many similarities between the style of Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence.

The title tends to revolve around the protagonist, in Hardy's novel the title revolves around "Jude" from "Jude, the obscure" and 'Tess' from "Tess of d'Urbervilles". The conflict can be seen in the protagonists from the very beginning. The ability of poor decision making in Paul can be juxtaposed with the decision making of Jude in the novel.

The protagonists in their novels are in search of a purpose and want to fulfil it as well. Due to some tragic events, this never happens and the layer of existential crisis can be seen in both of them. The purpose of life is being questioned in the novels.

The isolation is there in both texts. Jude is isolated from society and here, Paul just wants to be with his mother. This further develops when they start having comfort in art. The inability to make choice leads to chaos in their lives.

The novel "Tess of d'Urberville" also portrays the inability to make a decision. Tess does not trust Alec and refuses to get on the horse with him and the only error that she commits here is that she accepts the offer and soon gets on the horse with Alec. This leads to Alec taking advantage of her.

The sacrifice can be seen in the texts in terms of how Sue Bridehead accepts Phillotson in the end and she gives herself to him and in the novel *Sons and Lovers* how Miriam gives herself to Paul, she is spiritual yet she offers herself as a sacrifice to Paul. Tess sacrifices herself for the prosperity of her family. The story depicts the virginal sacrifice made by her; she loses her innocence to protect her family. She is trying to break away from the past. Soon, when she is there lying on the altar,

"Sleepy are you, dear? I think you are lying on an altar."

"I like very much to be here," she murmured. "It is so solemn and lonely—after my great happiness—with nothing but the sky above my face. It seems as if there were no folk in the world but we two; and I wish there were not—except 'Liza-Lu.'" (Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Project Gutenberg, 1994, www.gutenberg.org/files/110/110-h/110-h.htm)

Through these lines, we can also see how Tess has always put her family before her and how she is giving herself away and asking angels to take care of their family so that they can be the ones to lead a better life.

Miriam can also be seen in this light. She is the one to leave everything. At last, when she arrives to meet Paul, she realises that he does not love her and she sees in the conditions that he is living in. She realises that Paul might not change and soon she leaves towards the better prospects that she has got.

Anissa Sboui in her essay '*The main female characters in sons and lovers*' talks about these three important women in Paul's life were Gertrude Morel (mother), Miriam and Clara. The portrayal of women in the novel is done with a misogynistic perspective but we also see how the dominance is also prevailing in the household, it challenges the stereotypes and tries to break them as well. D.H. Lawrence establishes a dichotomy.

The background of the novel was such that the women were not seen as rebels or the ones having voices. The women were allowed to do the household chores and take care of the young ones obeying the orders of the man of the house. This is when Mrs Morel turns the tables and gives us the new perspective, even Clara says "You talk," she said, "about the cruelty of women; I wish you knew the cruelty of men in their brute force. They simply don't know that the woman exists." (pp. 417, Lawrence, D. H. *Sons and Lovers*. Collins Classics, 2010)

The mother-son relationship that she develops later in the novel further helps her to expand this set-up of dominance where she as the lover takes control of the household, the relationships of their sons and interferes with them. she absorbs him so much that her attachment paralyses Paul's life to that extent where he cannot be intimate with women and he cannot even have affairs with anyone. His relations are ruined.

The next female that we have is Miriam who is known to symbolise the spiritual aspect in Paul's life. she is in love with nature and she too, is challenging the gender roles in her ways but for Paul, she is not enough as he is unable to establish a relationship with her. Miriam is very religious and believes in spiritual communion as well. This is where Paul does not seem to agree with her. Thereby, he again repels her.

The last one is Clara; she is older than Paul and she is the one who leaves her husband to have an affair with Paul. She is the flesh in Paul's life as she is the one who quenches Paul's sexual thirst, while Miriam is the one who inspires Paul's soul and helps him out in terms of creativity. Clara is the one with immense beauty but she does not stay in his life forever, none of them does.

All these women contribute to Paul's journey where he is trying to discover himself but is unable to do so as he is the one who is trapped in darkness after his mother's death due to cancer. The childhood and the relationship that he shared with his mother has affected him and he is unable to have a stable relationship with anyone and the mentality of the

father can be seen in Paul and William as well as they both confirmed the stereotypes. In William's perspective, the women were objectified. Women were just there in his life as long as he wanted them to be, for Paul he was never able to recover from his mother's loss, thereby he continued to destroy himself. For Walter, he kept on abusing his wife and keeping her being the bars which were the house. He never saw Gertrude as a human or as his lover after they got married and Gertrude Morel resorted to her children and substituted her son as her lover.

In the essay "Stabat mater" Julia Kristeva states "A mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh, and consequently a division of language- and it has always been so." (Oliver, Kelly, editor. "Stabat Mater." *The Portable Kristeva*, Columbia university press, 1997, p. 322.) The mother has to have that detachment from herself so that she can produce another body within her body only to have that body removed. Further, she talks about the fate of women in society as reproducing according to the stereotypes that have been created by the society which confirms her role as someone who has to reproduce and also talks about how a mother is quiet, no one laments for the mother, there is no credit given to the mother. And here, we have a son who weeps for her mother's death as somewhere he too is connected with that very flesh that he was made from which is at times forgotten.

The connection is the one that overpowers him after the mother has died and later, we witness him like a Hamlet brooding over the thoughts of his existence. She further talks about the abyss that is there between the mother and child and when the umbilical cord is cut the child becomes a new person which also talks about another identity. Since, we are aware that the umbilical cord has not been cut (metaphorically) which leads to the incomplete development of personality in Paul which further depicts that Paul is still connected to his mother completely and thereby, the flesh has not been separated.

The cancer that mother had before she died is now the cancer of his existence that Paul has to bear till, he is dead. The emancipation of Paul is nothing but the beginning of his metaphorical cancer, that he will bear till the end of his time. The quest to become whole is inherent in the son and the mother, but for them, they become whole when they are together. Her disease, cancer, is also passed on to Paul from the moment she gets sick. In other words, for the mother, it is the cancer of the body, but for Paul, it is the metaphorical "cancer of existence" which shall be there with him.

CONCLUSION

The text of *Sons and Lovers* has many layers to it which need to be interpreted. The mechanism of desire and the love between the son and the mother which does take a different turn can be seen here. The love of the mother here is so powerful that rather than taking a nurturing role she takes the role of a lover and the metaphorical attachment of the umbilical cord leads to the "cancer of existence". The complex philosophy of love is made more complex through the novel, the dimension of motherly love to a jealous lover, where the Author is portraying everything implicitly.

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