

An Analysis of a Search for Fiction in Reality,
as Portrayed in the Fiction, Sons and Lovers, by D. H. Lawrence

A Senior Essay
Submitted to the Faculty
of Saint Meinrad College of Liberal Arts
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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May, 1983
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Virginia Woolf says of Sons and Lovers, "There is no arrangement that makes us say: 'Look at this. This scene, this dialogue has the meaning of the book hidden in it.'"¹ And I must agree with her. No such passage exists, because I don't believe that the meaning of the book is hidden at all. In fact Lawrence has plastered the "bloody" key right on the cover: Sons and Lovers. The book is a story about man's dichotomy in the search for the perfect relationship that will fulfill him in his humanness.

In his essay "...Love was Once a Little Boy", Lawrence insists, "Everything that exists, even a stone, has two sides to its nature."² In this novel the heroes are divided by being both soul and body, man and nature, son and lover.

To begin with the "sonny" side of the story, most mothers do experience a mysterious type of transcendental bond with their children. But Mrs. Morel's clutch on her offspring is so strong that it is unhealthy. Even before they can walk, their very cradles are turned into foxholes from which they enter the parental war that only periodically ceases fire long enough to passionately produce more troops, which the mighty major, Mrs. Morel, quickly alligns to her army camp. Mrs. Morel's marriage to her husband is a mistake. She marries him in passion for his body, and finds out only too late that he has no soul. She hates him for this and their life together becomes a battle of frustration. Deprived of spiritual love, she is forced to turn to her sons for concession. The only exception is the youngest Morel child, Arthur, who alone is fond of his father.

Arthur, however, is sent away to school at a young age, and having missed the exquisite exposition of military maneuvers at home, makes up for

it by joining the British army. Arthur is somehow spared the true scars of warfare, and is the only son to reach manhood peacefully.

You see, Mrs. Morel doesn't just ally her sons--she swallows them. Just as they had suckled her breast for nourishment as babes, she sucks on their souls. For example, when William, the eldest son, has made good in the business world and decides to go off to a job in London as a big success,

it never occurred to him that [his mother] 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 hoped in him so much. Almost she lived by him. Now he was going away...He [was taking] nearly all himself away.³

The key word here is "nearly", for while William might physically leave the dirty little mining town behind, he does not escape with his soul. William is faithful in sending a letter and a pound to his mother, his soul love, each week, and nearly every penny of his spare income is spent on presents for his family. Perhaps the best example of the strong bond that holds him can be seen when William has the chance of a lifetime to travel the Mediterranean quite cheaply. "But William came home for his fortnight's holiday. Not even the Mediterranean, which pulled at all his young man's desire to travel, and at his poor man's wonder at the glamorous south, could take him away when he might come home. That compensated his mother for much" (p. 82). It assures her that she has William's soul safe with her, and that it pulls him home, even at great sacrifice to himself.

But the physical William, a young man in London, also pulls on him, and he begins chasing girls about town. While William has been succumbing to this side of his being for quite some time, it is never seriously submit-

ted to. William even assures his mother that all of the girls he knows are equal in his eyes, and when they are done trying to catch him, he merely walks away from them. Mrs. Morel warns him that one day his legs will be shackled and he will be unable to walk away freely.

This very thing happens, and the key to the constraint is held by one Lily Denys Western. Thank God William affectionately calls her Gipsy, or Gyp, so I will also. Shortly after William writes a letter home telling of his feminine find, the regular mailings begin to falter, and the money that was faithfully turned over to mother is turning into everything from extravagant hats to necessary undergarments for the Lady Gyp.

William sends a picture of his beloved home. It is a head and shoulders shot without a stitch of clothing on either of the parts of the anatomy mentioned. Mrs. Morel, a stout Calvinist, voices her distaste of the photograph, and another is sent. This time the lady is vested in a conservative black evening gown. The second photo is also accompanied by a silly note written by the thing photographed in the pictures.

From the first pornographic photo, we, as well as Mrs. Morel, see that the girl definitely appeals to William's animalistic nature. The request for the second photo is for examination of the girl's pull on her son's soul. When it is another studio-posed portrait, Mrs. Morel sarcastically says, "I'm sure I ought to be impressed" (p. 100). But the photo and the silly note only imprint upon her mind that Gyp is merely a show piece which could never hold her son, let alone steal his soul away from her. Mrs. Morel's interpretation of the girl is correct except in one thing.

She could understand nothing but love-making and chatter. ~~William~~ William was accustomed to having all of his thoughts sifted through his mother's mind; so, when he wanted companionship, and was

asked in reply to be the billing and twittering lover, he hated his betrothed (p. 131).

His betrothed? you may ask in surprise. But it is true. This is the flaw in Mrs. Morel's interpretation. Somehow the attraction of the two bodies is too strong for William to break. He states that "...for some things he couldn't do without her" (p. 132). But he also realizes what a worthless wench she is when anything more than love-making is desired, and he tells his mother so. Mrs. Morel sees him heading into the same mistake she had made when choosing a mate, and insistantly advises against the union.

Now we can see the picture of Mrs. Morel's mule team hitching up to William's soul and pulling, trying to free him of the schackles that our lusty Lady Gyp has slapped on the boy's body. Poor William Morel, being caught in the middle cannot withstand the opposing strains and is severed at the stomach.

William does not marry Gyp, and as he lies on his death-bed he asks for his mother, not his fiancée. The Major Mother wins the battle, but at the very dear cost of her most treasured troop.

Mrs. Morel deeply mourns the loss of her eldest son. So much so that she neglects her daily duties, and in her brooding also denies her second son attention, though he tries desperately to attain it. Finally, after three months of starvation to his soul, Paul's body falls dangerously ill with pneumonia. Mrs. Morel realizes that her neglect is to blame and makes contrition, "I should have watched the living, not the dead" (p. 140). But is it too late?

Paul was very ill. His mother lay in bed at nights with him; they could not afford a nurse. He grew worse, and the crisis approached. One night he tossed into consciousness in the ghas-

tly, sickly feeling of dissolution, when all the cells in the body seem in intense irritability to be breaking down, and consciousness makes a last flare of struggle, like madness.

"I s'll die, mother!" he cried, heaving for breath on the pillow.

She lifted him up, crying in a small voice: "oh, my son--my son!"

That brought him to. He realized her. his whole will rose up and arrested him. He put his head on her breast, and took ease of her for love. Mrs. Morel's life now rooted itself in Paul (p. 141).

With this passage we see that Mother and child mutually make the other their sole, or soul (I can't decide which spelling to use) life giving force. Mrs. Morel, realizing that privation of her attention nearly killed Paul, but not realizing that it was the overabundance of unhealthy consideration and demands which succeeded in killing William, draws on Paul even more fervently, trying to make amends to him.

Of course, Mrs. Morel's bond to Paul has always been intense. He came into the world a very sickly child and wasn't really expected to live. Mrs. Morel hadn't wanted the baby, because it was not born out of love for her husband, but mere momentary passion. And then one day while holding the infant, as yet without a name, "a wave of hot love went over her to the infant...With all her force, with all her soul she would make up to it for having brought it into the world unloved. She would love it all the more now it was here; carry it in her love" (p. 37). And this she does for the rest of her life, even more so after William's death, and Paul lives for her. Each day he hurries home from work to share with her his time away

from her. Paul is an artist, and he draws his inspiration from her, and dedicates his work to her. They go places and do things together. They are each other's lives. Paul even says at one point, "I'll never marry while I've got you--I won't" (p. 245). He realizes that the love of his mother is so strong, that no other woman could ever have his soul.

Paul does seek the companionship of other women however. The first of which is Miriam Leivers. Paul meets Miriam at a relatively young age, and they grow to be quite good chums. So good in fact that such a relationship usually culminates in the marriage of childhood sweethearts. This relationship, however, is too directly in conflict with the spiritual love that exists between Paul and his mother. For this reason, Mrs. Morel seems to hate Miriam, and for that reason Paul will at various times wish to discontinue his contact with her, and they part ways for a short time. But then he ends up returning to her. There is something he needs in a relationship with another woman, but whatever it is, he finally sees that it is not to be found in Miriam. At their final parting, she angrily calls him a child of four and he says in his heart, "All right; if I am a child of four, what do you want me for? I don't want another mother" (p. 296).

With this thought, Paul acknowledges that mere satisfaction of the intellect is not enough in a love relationship, or else he wouldn't even be seeking others besides his mother. And it cannot be mere sensual pleasure, because Miriam sacrifices her body to him, and he is still leaving her. So what is it? What lures him away from his soul's tabernacle?

We are told very early in the book exactly what it is that Paul is seeking. When Paul is just a toddling babe, his home is frequented by the widowed parish clergyman, Mr. Heaton. The parson spends hours talking to Mrs. Morel, almost as a consolation for the deprived marriage of mere bodies with her

collier husband. So while Paul is flesh of the pit-dirtied miner, he is the godson of Mr. Heaton. The preacher's only quotation in the entire novel is uttered with his soul sibling in his lap.

When Christ changed the water into wine at Cana, that is a symbol ~~that~~ that the ordinary life, even the blood, of the married husband and wife, which had before been uninspired, like water, became filled with the spirit, and was as wine, because, when love enters, the whole spiritual constitution of a man changes, is filled with the Holy Ghost, and almost his form altered (p. 33).

Mrs. Morel pities the poor widower for having turned the love of a dead wife into the Holy Spirit, and dismisses the notion as an unattainable ideal, as the all too tangible result of her lust slushes into the house covered with pit dirt. But somehow this idea concerning a baptism of life between man and woman permeates through the clergyman's groin into the uncomprehending suckling. When Paul does go to women later in his life, it is as if he is indeed looking for this baptism. That's the sought after treasure in the other women in his life.

Upon examination of Paul's most intimate moment with Miriam, we can see that she will not provide the fountain of sacramental submergence. The experience is the sharing of a wild rose bush which Miriam had discovered, "She knew it was wonderful. And yet, till he had seen it, she felt it had not come into her soul." and upon seeing it together, "Paul looked into Miriam's eyes. His look seemed to travel down into her. Her soul quivered. It was the communion she wanted" (p. 160).

It was not what Paul wanted though. The experience causes Paul pain and he very abruptly, almost rudely, says good-bye to Miriam and runs home to his mother.

The experience with Miriam is sacramental, but it is communion, not the baptism of life he is seeking. He runs quickly away in fear and pain because every day of his life he lives in perfect spiritual communion with his mother, and to have the same experience with another scares him.

When he returns home after the communion, the reader is told, "Mrs. Morel could feel Paul being drawn away by the girl. And she did not care for Miriam" (p. 160). Mrs. Morel says of her;

She exults--she exults as she carries him off from me. She's not like an ordinary woman, who can leave me my share in him. She wants to absorb him. She wants to draw him out and absorb him till there is nothing left of him, even for himself. He will never be a man on his own feet--she will suck him up (p. 193).

And so Mrs. Morel fights Miriam for Paul, and in the end proves the stronger when he discovers that a surrogate mother is not his goal.

So we are shown that spiritual soul unity is not the baptism of life which Paul's godfather spoke of. Where will Paul look next? He turns to the other side of his being, he goes to the body, the animal part of himself.

While it is true that Paul has intercourse with Miriam, he in no way makes passionate love with her. Whenever he goes to her it is a sacrifice. She removes herself and raises the entire act to a religious level. Even in intercourse, Miriam will not allow their bodies to enter into the relationship.

The fulfillment of the nature side of Paul is found in an outspoken suffragette. Clara Dawes is a married woman and possesses something that Paul "hankers after". After a short and superficial social relationship, they become lovers. But of a completely different sort than Miriam's love for Paul. Clara never wants Paul's soul. In fact, she doesn't even want to know it.

There is, however, a sharing between them that is necessary for Paul's life. Let's examine the most intimate experience in their shared love together.

Clara was not there for him, only a woman, warm, something he loved and almost worshipped, there in the dark. But it was not Clara, and she submitted to him.

And after such an evening they both were very still, having known the immensity of passion. To know their own nothingness, to know the tremendous living flood which carried them always, gave them rest within themselves. If so great a magnificent power could overwhelm them, identify them altogether with itself, so that they knew they were only grains in the tremendous heave that lifted every grass blade its little height, and every tree, and living thing, then why fret about themselves?

It seemed almost as if he had known the baptism of fire in passion, and it left him at rest. But it was not Clara. It was something that happened because of her, but it was not her. They were scarcely any nearer each other. It was as if they had been blind agents of a great force (pp. 353-4).

The great force is nature itself. Through Clara, Paul realizes the fullness of his nature. As the animal in him, he is able to become one with the grass and trees. Because of Clara, he receives the baptism of fire in passion, the fullness of nature. This is something that Miriam could not give Paul. And yet even with Clara, something is missing. Paul is still the same man he has always been. His "constitution" hasn't changed. His form hasn't altered.

For everything but sex, Paul still goes to his mother. Mrs. Morel knows that Clara is no threat to the hold she has on Paul's soul, and knows also that Paul will lose interest in her, so there is no threat of his making the

mistake of marriage which she had. So she accepts Clara as she never had Miriam.

Paul realizes that he doesn't love Clara as he ought to, precisely because she hasn't changed him as a man. But almost as if he is tired of searching, he is willing to live in two worlds; one with his mother, the other with Clara. Paul still wonders though about that mysterious transformation, and he says to his mother on one of their many intimate evenings,

"You know, mother, I think there must be something the matter with me, that I can't love. Why don't I want to marry Clara or anybody?"

He went on painting rather despairingly; he had touched the quick of the trouble.

"As for wanting to marry," said his mother, "there's plenty of time yet."

"But no, mother, I even love Clara and I did Miriam; but to give myself to them in marriage I couldn't. I couldn't belong to them. They seem to want me, and I can't ever give it them."

"You haven't met the right woman."

"And I never shall meet the right woman while you live." he said.

Mrs. Morel was very quiet. Now she began to feel again tired, as if she were done (p. 351).

After the revelation that Paul can never find the right woman while his mother breathes, she knows that she has dreadfully wronged her son in holding him the way she has. It has all gone too far, however, to be turned back now. Paul's soul is hopelessly hers, and she cannot give it back. Mrs. Morel comes to understand that it is true that Paul will not marry while she lives. For the sake of her son--she must die, and liberate his soul. It's as if she had finally admitted that the death of her oldest son was her fault, and she will

not allow her second son to suffer any longer in the same fashion. Her work is done. Paul is an adult, and she is only a hindrance to his becoming a man. The words she earlier spoke of Miriam have turned and pointed the guilty finger upon herself. After this, "[Paul]" and his mother seemed almost to avoid each other. There was some secret between them which they could not bear" (p. 368).

Mother Morel begins to fail in health and worsens steadily until she is bed-ridden and the doctor says that she won't last long. But she continues to linger for months. Paul cannot bear her in this state and wishes she would just be done with it.

Mrs. Morel knows that she must die, and yet wants to hang on to life. She has brought herself this far, but cannot seem to cross the barrier. Finally Paul, fearing the loss of his sanity, poisons his mother with morphia. He puts it in her milk, and she comments on the bitterness of the drink. Paul wonders if she knows. It is as if she did want to die, but cannot for fear of taking her son's soul with her. But when Paul is consciously killing her, she is assured that in taking her life and wanting her to die, he is also taking back his soul and she knows he wants to live. She drinks the milk obediently. A twenty-one gun salute for the death of the Major Morel.

Paul seems lost without his mother. "He talked to barmaids, to almost any woman, but there was that dark, strained look in his eyes as if he were hunting something" (p. 410). The something he hunted was more than Clara, for he gave her back to her husband, and it was more than a replacement for his mother, because he went to Miriam after her death, but could not bring himself to marry her. "Nobody held him...And if nobody would help, he would go on alone" (p. 410). And so the quest continues...alone.

Well, are you disappointed? I was. We're left saying, 'Okay, but what the hell is the baptism of life? Where can it be found? You've spent an entire novel presenting a problem, and now you have the audacity to leave it unresolved. We're left with less than when we started.'

One critic says that "Sons and Lovers" does not embody the substance of Lawrence's vision, as we find it, whether successfully or not, embodied in later works."⁴ After reading this, I immediately ran to Lawrence's 'later works', and in his essay "...Love was Once a Little Boy", a non-fictional work, Lawrence says, "As soon as you start with a case of 'true love' between a man and a woman, you end with a terrific struggle and conflict of the two opposing egos or individualities. It is nobody's fault: it is the inevitable result of trying to snatch an intensified individuality out of the mutual flame."⁵

So, true love then is a struggle. Paul struggles with Miriam, she wants to own him. Is this true love? But we've proven that it isn't what Paul is looking for. Paul also struggles with his mother, to the point of having to kill her because she does own him. Where is the resolution?

Stephen Spender says, "What interested Lawrence, was the tension between art and life, not the complete resolution of the problems of life within the illusion of art... For him literature is a kind of pointer to what is outside literature... This outsideness of reality is for Lawrence the waters of baptism in which man can be reborn."⁶

If we look carefully at the passage where Paul hears about the transformation of man from his godfather, we see that he bases his theory on the Bible, a piece of **literature**. **And** he himself is widowed. Mrs. Morel is correct in dismissing his notion as a remembered ideal of his own relationship with his dead wife. By re-creating the past, he forms a fiction and can thereby be

reborn in that memory.

Paul Morel is searching in reality for what only exists in art. The 'waters of baptism in which man can be reborn' do not exist in a woman, a relationship, or anything outside of art; literature; fiction. Paul's life is wasted in an endless hunt for a thing, a treasure, that does not exist on the level at which he is searching for it...He is looking for a lie.

Alvastain Niven says that the inclusion of William in the story "justifies the plural in the title."⁷ Horace Gregory says that it is "the tragedy of a generation of men".⁸ But don't men still today go out in search of the perfect woman who will take both sides of their beings, their sonship and their hunger for being lovers, and somehow fuse these together and raise them up to a higher level of humanness? Perhaps better said, don't naive children, who haven't learned that rainbows are only illusions in the sky still chase after them, seeking the pot of gold at their ends?

Notes

¹W. T. Andrews, Critics on D. H. Lawrence, (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), p. 38.

²D. H. Lawrence, Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine, and Other Essays, (Bloomington: I. U. Press, 1963), p. 183.

³D. H. Lawrence, Sons and Lovers, (New York: Penguin Books, 1976). p. 55. All internal notations refer to this edition.

⁴Eliseo Vivas, D. H. Lawrence: The Failure and Triumph of Art, (Bloomington: I. U. Press, 1964), p. 174

⁵D. H. Lawrence, Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine, and Other Essays, p. 162.

⁶Mark Spilka, D. H. Lawrence: A Collection of Critical Essays, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, inc., 1963), p. 16.

⁷Alastair Niven, D. H. Lawrence: The Novels, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 45.

⁸Horace Gregory, Pilgrim of the Apocolypse, (London: Martin Secker Ltd., 1934). p. 18.

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