

The Conflict between Maternal Love and Sons' Emotional Development in D.H. Lawrence Sons and Lovers

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the harmful effects of a mother's excessive affection on her son's emotional behaviors, thereby hindering his emotional development along its typical trajectory. By revealing the ruling concept of possessive love that regrettably shapes the human condition in *Sons and Lovers*, Lawrence acknowledges the elements that ultimately promote human emancipation. While it is accurate that Lawrence has not fully identified his technique in *Sons and Lovers* as Schorer contends, commonly resorting to clear descriptions of setting, natural phenomena to express psychological states, and serious qualifications that approach didacticism, it is equally true that he has been thematically and creatively cognisant of the elements that distort human beings and render man powerless. Lawrence contends that the repudiation of negative states like dependence, possessiveness, and rationality will actualise the rhythm of being that renders humanity complete.

Keywords: Possessive Love, Emotional Development, *Sons and Lovers*, Human Emancipation.

الصراع بين الحب الأمومي والتطور العاطفي للأبناء في رواية «الأبناء والعشاق» لـ ديفيد هيربرت لورنس

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الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى بحث الآثار الضارة للمحبة المفرطة التي تبديها الأم تجاه ابنها في سلوكه العاطفي، وما يترتب عليها من إعاقة تطوره العاطفي عن السير في مساره الطبيعي. ومن خلال الكشف عن مفهوم الحب التملكي المهيمن، الذي يؤسف له أنه يشكل الحالة الإنسانية في رواية «الأبناء والعشاق»، يقر لورنس بالعناصر التي تسهم في نهاية المطاف في تحقيق تحرر الإنسان. وعلى الرغم من صحة القول إن لورنس لم يحدّد بصورة كاملة تقنيته الفنية في رواية «الأبناء والعشاق»، كما يرى شورر، إذ يلجأ في الغالب إلى الوصف الواضح للمكان والظواهر الطبيعية للتعبير عن الحالات النفسية، فضلاً عن إيراد أحكام وتوضيحات جادة تقترب من النزعة التعليمية الوعظية، فإن من الصحيح أيضاً أنه كان واعياً، على المستويين الموضوعي والإبداعي، بالعناصر التي تشوّه

الإنسان وتجعله عاجزاً فاقداً للقدر على الفعل. ويرى لورنس أن نبذ الحالات السلبية، مثل التبعية والتملك والعقلانية، من شأنه أن يحقق إيقاع الوجود الذي يجعل الإنسانية مكتملة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحب التملكي، التطور العاطفي، الأبناء والعشاق، التحرر الإنسان

1. Introduction

D. H. Lawrence maintains a unique position in twentieth-century English literature as a novelist preoccupied with human psychology, sexuality, and emotional reality. *Sons and Lovers*, probably Lawrence's most autobiographical novel, represents a dramatic break with Victorian moral standards by emphasizing the unconscious forces that shape human relationships. The novel, published in 1913, echoes the intellectual ferment of the early twentieth century and especially the rising impact of psychoanalytic philosophy. At the core of *Sons and Lovers* is the emotionally charged connection between Gertrude Morel and her son, Paul. This maternal attachment is tender yet fiercely possessive, and it becomes a psychological trap that warps Paul's emotional development. Lawrence does not see desire as merely a bodily instinct but as a complex emotional and psychological experience shaped by early family relationships. The narrative thus becomes a dramatic study in overprotective parental love that prevents sexual maturity and emotional independence.

In this paper, we will analyze the main characters in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* using a qualitative analytical method grounded in Freudian psychoanalytic theory. The study is a close reading of the novel that purports to reveal a pattern of possessive love, emotional repression, and psychological conflict in the relationships between mothers and sons. The analysis explores how such unconscious psychological factors affect the emotional development and social connections of the protagonists, particularly Paul Morel, using the theoretical constructs of Sigmund Freud, specifically his theory of the id, ego, and superego, and the Oedipus complex. The original analysis of the text is supported and contextualized by secondary sources, including literary criticism and psychoanalytic studies.

2. Thematic Burden

The thematic weight of *Sons and Lovers* encapsulates what Dorothy Van Ghent accurately identifies as "an organic disturbance in the relationships between men and women," a biological disruption stemming from a possessive mother-instinct [1]. This disruptive sentiment is exemplified in Gertrude's demeanour towards her son Paul, who dons William's evening attire to attend the dinner party at Jordan's. As she caressed the silk collar, she contemplated her eldest son. However, this son was sufficiently immersed in the garments. She glided her fingers along his back to perceive him. He was living and belonged to her [2]. The implication clearly establishes Miriam as a formidable adversary. "I could permit another woman – but not her." "She would provide me no space" [ibid]. Miriam's "unordinariness" indeed renders her dispossessed: "And she exults so in taking you from me – She's not like ordinary girls" [ibid]. Previously, influenced by her bourgeois inclinations, she exhibits a form of personal ownership when she dismisses a girl who visits the Morels' residence to enquire about William: "I disapprove of the girls my son encounters at dances." "And she is not present at the residence" [ibid]. It is notably important that we perceive everything from Mrs. Morel's perspective.

Gertrude Coppard plays a significant role in Lawrence's story. Her positive and negative issues are well highlighted. "Lawrence depicts Mrs. Morel as an individual with an expansive vitality, albeit one capable of stifling the vitality of others" [3]. Her true value is in mirroring the anguish of bewildered humanity, namely, her progeny. Weiss asserts that "Gertrude Morel traverses *Sons and Lovers* like a cry of pain," and we must acknowledge her as a conduit for conveying and alleviating this suffering [4]. However, she is also the origin of the unpleasant reality of her boys, whose shortcomings are evident. Excluding Arthur, the justification for this paper's title lies in Lawrence's portrayal of William and Paul. The latter specifically addresses the fundamental themes of *Sons and Lovers*, themes that are permeated by his adverse reactions. The novel's abandoned title actually features the name, Paul Morel.

Paul recognizes his inability to love, a realization intrinsically linked to his almost reverential bond with his mother. Consequently, his affection for Clara and Miriam is insufficient for marriage, as he cannot provide a lasting commitment. Notably, his accusatory tone implies a bleak conclusion to his relationship with his mother: "But, no, mother, I even love Clara, and I did love Miriam; however, I could not commit to them in marriage." I was unable to belong to them. They appear to desire me; however, I am unable to provide what they desire [2]. Initially subdued, the Lawrentian language underscores Paul's 'biological' connection with an idealized mother: "Instinctively, he recognized that he was her life.

"Ultimately, she was of paramount importance to him, the singular supreme entity. This relationship continually influences him, and Paul attributes his inability to love to it: "And I never shall see the right woman while you live" [ibid].

If Paul does not express affection, Miriam's shortcomings become much more evident. Miriam closely resembles Hermione Roddice in *Women in Love*, characterized by her "exhausting... mental pressures" [5]. She experiences emotional failure with Paul because of her disconnection from life. We perceive in her, only in fleeting moments, the qualities that connect her to an exceptionally creative cosmos. The narrative underscores her aversion to and trepidation regarding physical contact, as well as the primal force that revitalizes humanity. Unable to present herself as a lady, she resorts to her spirituality: "Her soul trembled." "It was the communion she desired" [2]. She emphatically highlights her abstraction, a term that appears both explicitly and implicitly in *Sons and Lovers*. Paul recognizes that "the intimacy between them had remained abstract" [ibid]. Paul acknowledges that Miriam seeks an intellectual engagement that ultimately hones her abstraction: "with Miriam, he was always on the high plane of abstraction" [ibid]. To possess Paul exclusively, he must first be rendered abstract [ibid]. Her possessive nature, combined with her "masculine" traits and animosity towards men [ibid], as well as her disdain for the male gender [ibid], indicates her struggle "to establish normal human relationships with anyone" [ibid]. Consequently, she resorts to an almost perverse substitute in nature: "thus, her friend, her companion, her lover, was Nature" [ibid]. Her fervent religiosity [ibid], and mysticism [ibid], her emotions of guilt for contemplating love for Paul, and her Christ-like humility [ibid], which is evidently "not a contrived demeanour but Miriam's acknowledgement of her destined martyrdom on the cross of male desire." Her preoccupation with "inner life," as indicated in her French diary, her persistent focus on literature [ibid], her passivity [ibid], her negativity, her obstructive virginity [ibid], and debilitating "purity",

along with her moral sensibility ("she was his conscience"), collectively enhance her abstract nature or non-physical existence.

Miriam's inability to experience conventional love can be conclusively linked to her mother's religious fervour. Lawrence depicts Mrs. Leivers as a mother who "elevated everything, even mundane housework, to the level of a sacred duty" and who could impart her values to her girls but not to her sons: "she was unable to instill it (the doctrine of 'the other cheek') in the boys at all. She achieved greater success with the girls, and Miriam was her beloved child". Previously, Lawrence prepares us for certain nullifying implications as he powerfully intertwines the two women's feelings of mysticism, rooted in a destructive maternal sense of possessiveness. This disruptive sentiment is exemplified in Gertrude's demeanour towards her son Paul, who dons William's evening attire to attend the dinner party at Jordan's. As she caressed the silk collar, she contemplated her eldest son. However, this son was sufficiently present within the garments. She ran her hand along his back to touch him. He was living and belonged to her [ibid]. The implication clearly establishes Miriam as a formidable adversary. "I could permit another woman – but not her." "She would provide me no space". Miriam's "unordinariness" indeed renders her dispossessed: "And she exults so in taking you from me – She is not like ordinary girls". Previously, influenced by her bourgeois inclinations, she exhibits a form of personal ownership when she dismisses a girl who visits the Morels' residence to enquire about William: "I disapprove of the girls my son encounters at dances." "And she is not present at the residence". It is notably important that we perceive all of this from Mrs. Morel's perspective.

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Miriam's inability to experience conventional love may be confidently attributed to her mother's religious fervour. Lawrence depicts Mrs. Leivers as a woman who "elevated everything, even mundane housework, to the realm of a sacred obligation" and who could impart her values to her girls but not to her sons: "she was unable to instill the doctrine of 'the other cheek' in the boys at all. She achieved greater success with the girls, and Miriam was her beloved child" [ibid]. Previously, Lawrence prepares us for certain nullifying consequences as she powerfully intertwines the two women's mystical feelings. Her great companion was her mother. They were both brown-eyed and 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.

Significantly, Lawrence's tale underscores Miriam's immersive reality and her inability to engage in physical love. We observe these adverse gestures from the perspectives of Paul and Gertrude. Consequently, Paul's mother is concerned to discover that "she (=Miriam) will consume him" [6]. Paul recognizes that "she desired to encompass all of him" (Lawrence 239). In the scene where Miriam intends to demonstrate a particular wild rose bush to Paul, she vexes him with her unsettlingly executed ritual: "she lifted her hand impulsively to the flowers; she went forward and touched them in worship". This emotional intensity, bordering on perversion, ultimately compels Paul to a vehement outburst in his valedictory letter to her: "See, you are a nun. I have bestowed upon you what I would offer a sacred nun - akin to a mystic monk's gift to a mystic nun" [7].

Consequently, we come to understand that Paul's notions of physical love fundamentally contrast with Miriam's. While she perceives it as a torturous and disgraceful deed, he regards it as a wonderfully rhythmic response that astonishingly connects him with the non-human drives of a blind

and overpowering instinctual existence. As a rule, when he started love-making, the emotion was strong enough to carry with it everything - reason, soul, blood, in a great sweep. Gradually, the little criticism, the little sensations, were lost; thought also went, everything borne along in one flood. He became not a man with a mind, but a great instinct [8].

Miriam falters with Paul because of her complete lack of aptitude for that artistic endeavor. Her highlighted sterility may finally elucidate Paul's revulsion: "he despised her for having acquired him, yet not fully possessing him, and he tormented her. She appropriated everything and contributed nothing, he stated. At the very least, she provided no semblance of warmth. She was never alive and emanating vitality" [ibid]. Conversely, Paul's sense of failure unfolds progressively: "Initially, it was merely sadness. Subsequently, he started to sense that he could not continue" [ibid].

Paul's indication of his intention to sever ties with Miriam, following the floral scene and initiated by the poignant statement, "the beauty of the night made him want to shout" [9], is notably significant. The "half-moon," the "white fence of lilies," the alluring Corncrake, and the "brutal" perfume of "purple iris" collectively create a tremendously uplifting scene that awakens in Paul the dark energy that reconciles him with the inherent rhythm of existence.

Previously, Miriam recognizes that he is attempting to liberate himself from her: "And in her heart of hearts, unconsciously she felt that he was trying to get away from her" [10]. She appears to have anticipated the dissolution of their relationship, attributing the blame to Paul's immaturity: "You are a child of four," she reiterated in her fury" [11]. Confounded, she then accuses him of instigating the conflict. "You have consistently resisted me." However, her subconscious thoughts indicate that she consistently acknowledges the influence of the perilous competitor in Paul's mother: "She suspected that someone had been swaying him. She perceived the rigidity and unfamiliarity of an external influence affecting him" [12].

Paul succeeds with Clara until she realizes he is not hers. "She understood that she never completely possessed him. A significant and essential aspect of him remained outside her control; she neither attempted to grasp it nor sought to comprehend its nature."

In contrast to Miriam's notion of love, Clara's implies a physically receptive woman, thus Paul's "passion," a term that prominently features as the title of an extensive chapter in *Sons and Lovers*. Lawrence illustrates Clara's adaptability in an exceptionally evocative scene: "Will you go down to the river?" he asked. She looked at him, leaving herself in his hands. He went over the brim of the declivity and began to climb down. 'It is slippery,' he said. 'Never mind,' she replied [13].

When they rest between the roots of two beech-trees on a hill ..., the scene eventually assumes a symbolic value where scarlet flowers baptize passion: When she rose, he, looking on the ground all the time, saw suddenly sprinkled on the black wet-beech roots many scarlet carnation petals, like splashed drops of blood; and red, small splashes fell from her bosom, streaming down her dress to her feet [14].

Clara becomes a burden only when she pursues matters to an excessive degree: "The night is free to you" [15]. Clara's nearly male mind serves as a disruptive factor: "At times, when I perceive her solely as a woman, I adore her, mother; however, when she speaks and critiques, I frequently disregard her" [16]. In Miriam, Paul perceives a girl with an excessively constrictive demeanour:

"but love should impart a sense of freedom, not imprisonment. Miriam made me feel constrained like a donkey tethered to a post. It is abhorrent!" [17].

Clara posits an impersonal relationship that does not support the amalgamation of identities that Miriam seeks: "It is through the very strangeness of the woman that Paul gains access to the darkness which encompasses both the unknown forces and purposes of the wheeling universe" [6]. A significant excerpt in *Sons and Lovers* clearly indicates the point: All the while, the peewits were screaming in the field. He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. They were dark and shining and strange, life wild at the source starting into his life, stranger to him, yet meeting him, and he put his face down on her throat, afraid. What was she? A strong, strange, wild life that breathed with him in the darkness through this hour. It was all much bigger than themselves that he was hushed. They had met, and included in their meeting the thrust of the manifold grass-stem, the cry of the peewit, the wheel of the stars [18].

In D.H. Lawrence, "darkness" consistently possesses profound symbolic significance, as exemplified in this paragraph. Ghent further substantiates this conclusion by indicating its emotional intensity: "... it (=darkness) offers itself with a special richness to Lawrence because of the character of his governing vision. Darkness is half of the rhythm of day, the darkness of unconsciousness is half of the rhythm of the mind, and the darkness of death is half of the rhythm of life. Denial of this phase of a universal tide is the great sin, the sin committed by the modern economy and modern rationalism. In acceptance of the dark, man is renewed to himself and to light, to consciousness, to reason, to brotherhood" [1].

Clara positively reciprocates Paul's physical advances, aligning herself with the primal instincts of a masculine cosmos, much like Paul. This illustrates how Lawrence conveys Clara's infatuation with Mrs. Limb's stallion. "'Your horse is an excellent specimen!' remarked Clara" [19]. This indicates that human experiences and values in D.H. Lawrence are perceived in relation to an animistic universe: ... 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? They could let themselves be carried by life, and they felt a sort of peace in each other. There was a verification that they had had together. Nothing could nullify it, nothing could take it away; it was almost their belief in life [20].

It can be confidently asserted that unconscious emotional strength consistently influences males' attitudes towards the girls they seek to love. Consequently, Gertrude's sons both tacitly and explicitly juxtapose the lover's image with their mother's distinctive archetype. Paul implies Miriam's sterility by stating, "There was no looseness or abandon about her". In contrast, in chapter XII, he illustrates his mother's adaptability: "See, my mother looks as if she had had everything necessary for her living and developing. She exhibits no semblance of sterility." Previously, the earnest and contemplative woman diminishes in stature before William, his superficial and careless paramour, Miss Western: "You are aware, she is not akin to you, mother. She lacks seriousness and the capacity for critical thought". Miriam's emotional intensity stands in notable contrast to that of a composed and rational mother. Paul recognizes the stark contrast: "And this alarming, unadorned encounter with her own trivial experiences unsettled him. He was accustomed to his mother's reticence. Furthermore, on several occasions, he felt profound gratitude in his heart and spirit for having a mother who was both

rational and virtuous" [2]. Previously, the children who idolize their mother recognize her elegant and consistent movements: "Her movements were light and swift." Observing her was consistently enjoyable. Her children could find no fault in everything mom did or any movement she made" [4].

The lover's awkward movement prompts a troubling contrast to Paul: "She (=Miriam) was not clumsy, and yet none of her movements seemed quite the movement" [5]. Clara appears to be positively influenced by the steadfastness of Paul's mother: "There was something hard and certain in his mother, as if she never had a misgiving in her life" [7].

Conflict defines the Lawrentian narrative in *Sons and Lovers*. It is this network of conflicting perspectives that imparts structure to Lawrence's novel. Consequently, Walter Morel and Gertrude Coppard had a promising beginning; however, the seed of discord was present. During their romance, Gertrude is captivated by "the dusky, golden softness of this man's sensuous flame of life that emanated from his flesh like the flame from a candle, unlike her own life, which was perplexed and consumed by the incandescence of thought and spirit". In chapter VIII, Walter Morel evokes her fleeting affection for a deteriorated spouse: "Morel observed her with timidity. He observed once more the fervour she had possessed for him. It illuminated her for an instant". Murfin posits that "the coupling of opposites will yield significant tensions." We acutely perceive this when the mother seeks fulfilment from her newborn baby. There began a battle between the husband and wife - A fearful, bloody battle that ended with the death of one. She fought to make him undertake his own responsibilities, to make him fulfil his obligations. However, he was too different from her. His nature was purely sensuous, and she strove to make him moral and religious. She tried to force him to face things. He could not endure it - It drove him out of his mind.

The greater the children's animosity towards their father, the stronger their attachment to their mother becomes. At this juncture, Walter Morrel is no longer an acknowledged member of the family. He was shut out from all family affairs. No one told him anything. The children, along with their mother, told her everything about the day's happenings. Nothing had really happened to them until they told their mother. However, as soon as the father came in, everything stopped. He was like the scotch in the smooth, happy machinery of the home. Moreover, he was always aware of this fall of silence on his entry, the shutting off of life, the unwelcome. The line evokes Butler's post-Victorian novel *The Way of All Flesh*, which reveals the oppressive bullying of a father [21].

Lawrence, however, reveals Walter Morel's harshness through narrative events that imply his disjointed reality.

The deteriorated connection of the Morels serves as the focal point of emotional turmoil in *Sons and Lovers*. Gertrude, who reveals to Paul, "I've never had a husband - not really", instigates the confrontation with her sons' partners and ultimately becomes its object. She perceives in possessive Miriam a competitor whose ethical fortitude mirrors her own: 'She exults - she exults as she carries him off from me', Mrs. Morel cried in her heart when Paul had gone. "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 in him, even for himself. He will never be a man on his own feet she will suck him up" [2].

It is plausible to assert that Miriam's preoccupation is precipitating the division in Paul's consciousness. Miriam similarly portrays Mrs. Morel as a troubling threat: "This is your mother..." "I am aware that she has never liked me" [2]. Previously, Miriam expressed indignation at the Morels' intrusion: "People should leave him and her alone" [9].

The battle between Miriam and Gertrude confounds and disheartens a perplexed Paul: "And he felt dreary and hopeless between the two" [2]. However, Paul ultimately resolves the matter by aligning himself with his mother. Paul's assertion elucidates the matter: "If Miriam inflicted suffering upon his mother, then he despised her" [4]. Recurring narrative scenes throughout Lawrence's works, such as Paul's distress over his mother's damaged umbrella [2] and her charred bread, exemplify his profound bond with her. During Paul's illness, the intimacy between Paul and his mother is recognized as that of lovers. Paul loved to sleep with his mother. Sleep is still most perfect... when it is shared with a beloved. The warmth, the security, and the peace of soul, the utter comfort of the other's touch, knit the sleep, so that it takes the body and soul completely in its healing. Paul lay against her and slept, and got better [5].

Significantly, Paul's residence serves as a sanctuary because of his mother: "I talk to her, but I want to come home to you" [2]. The illusory nature of all other locations underscores the one tangible reality remaining for Paul: "There was one place in the world that stood solid and did not melt into unreality: the place where his mother was" [2].

Conversely, Paul's mother embraces Clara, as the divorced woman does not compromise her moral integrity. It is noted: "He appeared to have an affinity for Mrs. Dawes. Regardless, that sentiment was invigorating" [2].

Paul's romantic partners also conflict. Miriam perceives Clara as an inferior rival: "It made Miriam bitter to contemplate that he would squander his soul on this superficial exchange of triviality with Clara" [4]. Subsequently, her admonitory comments indicate her concern for the evolving friendship between Paul and Clara: "What about Clara? I have not heard anything from her recently". Conversely, Clara is troubled by Paul's inability to forget Miriam: "And yet you love her!" She perceives in Miriam not the abstraction that Paul has come to despise, but a corporeal woman: "She desires none of your spiritual connection. That is a product of your own mind. She desires you" [19].

Paul's return to Miriam as 'a man' instigates a clear clash with his mother. His 'overbearing demeanour' serves as a symbol of this tension. Lawrence portrays a resentful image of an anxious, submissive, and neglected mother who, feeling overlooked, retreats into the solace of household chores as a replacement refuge. There was coldness between him and her. He hardly told her anything. Discarded, she waited on him, cooked for him still, and loved to slave for him, but her face closed again like a mask. There was nothing for her to do now but the housework, for all the rest had gone to Miriam. She could not forgive him. Miriam killed the joy and warmth in him [2]. Previously, her animosity towards Miriam manifests with like intensity: "You only desire me to serve you - the remainder is for Miriam" [ibid].

3. Conclusion

To reassess the narrative, one could critique the methodology employed in *Sons and Lovers*. Clearly, Lawrence endeavors in his fiction to examine and resolve his own issues, and there is nothing in the structure of his novel that renders it distinctive. Ghent accurately asserts that "it is the type of organization that a naive autobiographical novelist would likely employ". Significantly, Lawrence's "concrete" imagination does not distinguish between the reality derived from historical events and the metaphor that represents that reality, which elucidates his work for us. As Schorer contends, Lawrence is often caught between vivid descriptions of natural phenomena to express psychological states and earnest qualifications that approach didacticism. However, the work's thematic significance becomes evident. Love emerges as a central subject in *Sons and Lovers*. However, it ought to be mythically refined rather than psychologically, a point emphasized by Kazin in his exceptional essay "Sons, Lovers and Mothers". The legendary resonance in Lawrence's novels may elucidate his dissatisfaction with the Freudian analysis of his work: "I hated the Psychoanalysis Review of *Sons and Lovers*," he asserts in correspondence with Barbara Low.

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