

The Critical Interpretation of the Tumultuous Family Life in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913)

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How to cite this paper: Mandibaye, S., Boro, A. R. I., & Seguedeme, H. A. (2020). The Critical Interpretation of the Tumultuous Family Life in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913). *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 8, 53-63.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2020.87005>

Received: May 3, 2020

Accepted: July 6, 2020

Published: July 9, 2020

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Abstract

Living in the same society often leads us to build particular relation between each other. Getting married is one of those particular relations we build. But we get married for good and for worse. It is an enterprise full of problems and difficulties and only if you experience it that you can better understand. In *Sons and Lovers* by D. H. Lawrence a series of miseries and dangers of marriage has been enumerated as well as family life, and the issue of children education, etc. The novel not only provides some of the most vivid descriptions of life in an unsettled industrial society, but also illustrates certain studies of human relationships within which frustrations, happiness, disappointment and pleasures of family life both absorb and renew enormous amounts of energy in almost everyone's life. The main aim of this paper is to explore in different ways, the tumultuous family life and suggest effective steps for harmonious family life.

Keywords

Critical Interpretation, Tumultuous, Family Life, *Sons and Lovers*, D. H. Lawrence

1. Introduction

The theme of the *Sons and lovers*, David Herbert Lawrence's first successful autobiographical novel published in 1913 cannot be stated easily. Surely, it is an extremely powerful novel of deep sincerity, which studies with great insight the relationship between son and mother. Indeed, the story is constructed around

the emotional dynamics of the Morel family and charts the gradual decline of the middle son, Paul Morel, as he navigates tensions between his romantic life and his family life. Paul Morel is emotionally connected to and influenced by his mother so that he is unable to form lasting relationships when he encounters other women. As Martin [Stephen \(1986\)](#) recounted:

“It has been said that there was sexual tension in Lawrence’s family, as a result of the blend it contained of working-class and middle-class attitudes to sexuality. Tension in sexuality is certainly a feature of Lawrence’s work, and the whole movement in his work is towards a wholeness of personality that has at its heart the free expression of sexual desires” (1986: 226).

Most of topics in Lawrence’s novels deal with sexuality. Lawrence saw sexuality as a driving force in human relationships. He believed in love as a passion and a force that was both releasing and inexorable, but also believed that love must be felt and created on an instinctive level; as a passion it cannot answer to rationality or reason. For Raymond [Williams \(*Culture and Society*, 1985\)](#), it is easy to be aware of Lawrence’s great effect on our thinking about social values, but it is difficult, for a number of reasons, to give any exact account of his actual contribution. It is not only that this public projection of him is very different from his actual work, and that this has led to important misunderstandings (that he believed that “sex solves everything”). Though sex is frequently his theme, Lawrence is deeply conscious of its religious nature, so that, it is handled as a sacred thing, spiritual not animal.

To understand *Sons and Lovers*, it is necessary to explain it in terms of the author’s ideas, psychological state and even some knowledge of his private life. Lawrence’s father was a Midland miner. His mother, a woman of strong character and fine feeling, was a deep influence in his life. The domestic resources were small, but Lawrence found a way of intellectual escape in the peculiarities of elementary education. The mining communities which the Morels are part of, and which are similar to the one that Lawrence himself grew up in, are totally reliant on natural resources for their own survival. For the miners and mining communities, life is dependent on nature and on natural ecosystems, even if the result of this process is ugliness and pollution.

In *Sons and Lovers*, Lawrence had enumerated all the miseries and dangers of marriage, family life, bringing up children, etc. It not only provides some of the most vivid descriptions of life in an unsettled industrial society, but also illustrates certain studies of human relationships within which frustrations, happiness, disappointment and pleasures of family life both absorb and renew enormous amounts of energy in almost everyone’s life. In this article, we shall begin to explore in different ways, the tumultuous family life in this novel.

2. Walter Morel as a Figure of an Intimidating Father

People are used to saying that the perfect father does not exist and Walter Morel

is an illustration because he seems not to be a model of “at-home good father”. M. Morel does not spend too much time with his family and his enjoyments are his time spent with alcohol and his miner friends. He finds his happiness in routine life but doesn’t bother much about the family. Lawrence points out that Morel is only happy when he is drunk:

“...Morel came home drunk. He had been for a walk over the fields to Nottingham with a friend, and had been drinking for most of the day. He had been feeling very happy in the Lord Nelson on the way home, but by the time he arrived he was becoming bad-tempered. (7)”.

This quotation depicts the main feature of Morel. Like in any developing country, the English culture at the time of Lawrence is very male dominated and the father is usually the head of family and his most important function is to provide housing, health, nutrition, safety; in other words, to ensure the economic security to his family members. In this context, Morel is supposed to be the head of the family, to make the decisions and to rule the household. Terry Eagleton (2008: p. 152) in his psychoanalysis of the novel caricatures the Morel family as:

The family set up of the Morel is part of what is known as the “sexual division of labour” which in capitalist society takes the form of the male parent being used as labour-power in the productive process while the female parent is left to provide the material and emotional “maintenance” of him and the labour-force of the future (the children).

Patriarchy involves upholding the supposed priority of the male. In *Sons and Lovers* for example, during the early twentieth century, the idea of women having as much power as men was alien to their culture. Therefore, most of the decisions are taken by male figures and women are usually considered as junior members of the family (inferior in comparison to the male). The mother usually acts as a home maker and should remain at home as a housewife. The parental authority of Morel is at stake because he fails to provide the basic needs of his family members.

Walter Morel is a simple miner with simple needs and no motivation or want to advance in his job career. When he and Gertrude first met he had thick flowing black hair and a full beard and he also laughed a lot to suggest that he was a happy, relaxed figure. After his marriage with Gertrude, he vowed not to drink, but he broke his promise after the birth of William. Unfortunately, Morel’s drinking habits showed signs of alcohol dependence and could cause concerns with his family because of his precarious economic status. This severe dependence to alcohol results from his failure to meet major responsibilities at work and home. Ivan Illich (Tools for Conviviality, 1973) advises that in a consumer society there are inevitably two kinds of slaves: the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy. (what relation are you trying to establish with the previous facts you set forth?)

As we have attempted to indicate, drinking alcohol should not be only seen as part of enjoyment but as an essential component of work tradition in some cultures. Similarly, Lawrence's father used to drink a lot and faced financial instability as a consequence. For Roland Barthes (1957) "Cette substance galvanique est toujours considérée, par exemple, comme le plus efficace des désaltérants, ou du moins la soif sert de premier alibi à sa consommation ('il fait soif')". (*Mythologies*. 1954: 60). For this reason, Louis Althusser (2014: p. 85) suggests that the quantity of value (wages) necessary for the reproduction of labor power should be determined not by the needs of a biological' Guaranteed Minimum Wage (Salaire Minimum Interprofessionnel Garanti) alone, but by the needs of a historical minimum (Marx noted that English workers need beer while French proletarians need wine)—i.e. a historically variable minimum. This assertion is shared by Roland Barthes for whom alcohol consumption does not only have a symbolic role but is useful for the well-being of the consumer:

Etant par essence une fonction, dont les termes peuvent changer, le vin détient des pouvoirs en apparence plastiques: il peut servir d'alibi aussi bien au rêve qu'à la réalité, cela dépend des usagers du mythe. Pour le travailleur, le vin sera qualification, facilité démiurgique de la tâche ("cœur à l'ouvrage"). Pour l'intellectuel, il aura la fonction inverse: le "petit vin blanc" ou le "Beaujolais" de l'écrivain seront chargés de le couper du monde trop naturel des cocktails et des boissons d'argent (les seules que le snobisme pousse à lui offrir); le vin le délivrera des mythes, lui ôtera de son intellectualité, l'égalera au prolétaire; par le vin, l'intellectuel s'approche d'une virilité naturelle, et pense ainsi échapper à la malédiction qu'un siècle et demi de romantisme continue à faire peser sur la cérébralité pure (on sait que l'un des mythes propres à l'intellectuel moderne, c'est l'obsession "d'en avoir") (1954: 70).

Even if alcohol consumption has some benefit, no one can deny its negative impact in social life. In developing alcoholism, Morel with his very low income, is not able to respond to all the solicitations of his family and his expenses to their repeated pressuring demands. "*He never saved a penny, and he gave his wife no chance to save*" (7). In such circumstances, alcohol is often used to suppress feelings and relieve the symptoms of psychological disorders. As material deprivation worsened, parental involvement decreased markedly.

Morel's careless nature due to his hard working conditions drifted him away from family. In addition, Mr. Morel is victim of harassment in his workplace and his employment rights have been violated by his boss:

Although Morel was a good worker, his wages grew less. When he was in the pub, he would tell stories about the pit manager, and the pit manager, who disliked him, always heard about it and did not forgive him. He gave Morel the worst places in the pit to work in, so that he could not dig so much coal and therefore earned less (7).

In *Sons and Lovers*, Lawrence through Morel's working conditions, intends

also to criticize the industrialisation in England and its effects on minor miners. The author talks about exploitation and humiliation that is inflicted on the working class of England by the industrialists. It is evident that Morel's whole life is consumed by the mining activities which prevented him from fulfilling his social function and even social intercourse. It even doesn't enable him to devote much time for his children's education. His manager for example extends his time of production by shortening his actual lifetime; no matters how painful it may be. An illustrative instance of this thus reads:

Morel was not usually one of the first men to leave work, and that day he was working in a poor part of the mine, where it took greater effort to get the coal. He was in a bad temper and went on working after the other miners left, determined that he would not get home till that piece of work was finished, and angry that it took so long (11).

This statement is reinforced by Terry Eagleton in his psychoanalysis reading of the novel when he defends Morel's position:

Mr. Morel's estrangement from the intense emotional life of the home is due in part to this social division—one which alienates him from his own children, and brings them emotionally closer to the mother. If, as with Walter Morel, the father's work is especially exhausting and oppressive, his role in the family is likely to be further diminished: Morel is reduced to establishing human contact with his children through his practical skills about the house. (...). The fatiguing, harshly disciplined nature of the work process helps to create in him a domestic irritability and violence which drives the children deeper into their mother's arms, and which spurs on her jealous possessiveness of them. To compensate for his inferior status at work, the father struggles to assert a traditional male authority at home, thus estranging his children from him still further. (152).

Morel faces the challenges such as reduced financial resources, limited social support, social stigma, and constraints on time spent with their children. The autobiographical nature of the novel *Sons and Lovers* becomes explicit when we have a glance over the author's own life.

3. The Challenge of Motherly Love or Irony of Fate

The novel *Sons and Lovers* opens with the description of Gertrude Morel and William Morel's married life. Gertrude Morel is considered as the protagonist of the novel. She was a daughter of an engineer and came from a family of professionals while her husband Walter Morel, is a miner. Gertrude Morel is of a slightly higher social class. In comparison with Mr. Morel who is rather a "vain person", Mrs. Morel is the opposite. She is an intellectual and combative, "loved exchanging ideas, and the thing that gave her most pleasure was an argument on religion or politics with some educated man. (...). Her expression was deeply serious and full of a beautiful honesty" (3).

The story begins with the first meeting of Gertrude and Walter Morel at a Christmas party where she was impressed by his looks and dynamic character. They both decided to get married. Gertrude's character was portrayed as a concerned mother, an expecting wife and a woman with morals and taking care of their children. She loves her husband, Walter in the beginning but right after their marriage Gertrude discovered that Walter was not the man she thought he was. At their first child's birth, Gertrude's desire for Morel to be involved in the child's life also reportedly decreases over time and Morel began to be late in coming home.

And "... *she felt very alone; she was a long distance from her own family, and she felt a long distance from Morel, as well*" (6). As a consequence, "*she turned towards the child and away from the father*" (6). When Mrs. Morel comes to know that her husband is not as per her expectations, their relationships begin to disintegrate and she turns her attention to her sons in the hopes of filling the emotional void. Giving advice to her son Paul, she said: "*Nothing is as bad as a marriage that's a [sic] hopeless failure. Mine was bad enough, God knows, and ought to teach you something; but it could have been very much worse*" (47-48).

Gertrude tried to find her consolation with her sons, especially the eldest, William. She sent William to London to save him from the life of a miner like his father. "*If your mother sent you to work in the pit when you were twelve that is no reason why I should do the same with my boy*" (21). Morel's children sided with their mother against him. However, although Mrs. Morel does love her children, the consequence of her lack of passion for her husband is a life of hardship with a man who is abusive and whom she does not respect. According to her "*the only real rest seemed to be when he (Morel of course) was out of the house*" (10).

Gertrude Morel, a mother whose possessive love for her sons hinders their ability to establish fulfilling relationships with other women, and the expressed detestation of her husband closes him out of their lives. Gertrude cannot bear to see her children lead the same kind of life as her husband Walker so she makes sure they detest him, especially William and Paul. In this hardly remembered but persuasive way, she intentionally makes efforts to implant her own values about consumption in their children. She was so courageous that she bore the pain of his favourite child's death and then she took care of her second son Paul who was suffering from pneumonia, and she brought her back to life and moved all her expectations to him.

The relation to the mother has taken on a new, libidinal dimension: Mrs. Morel focused on Paul and appreciated his life as an artist. But at the same time, she was so much possessive for his sons that she never liked their girlfriends. She showed her dislike toward William's girlfriend, Lily Weston. She never liked Miriam whom her son loved throughout the novel. She felt somewhat uncomfortable because of the relationship between Paul and Miriam. Talking about Miriam, she said to herself: "*she is one of those who will want to suck a man's soul out*

until he has none of his own left" (62). As a reminder, the Oedipus complex is the theory that infant children are attracted to their parent of the opposite gender and that they become jealous of the parent of the same sex.

Lawrence's blend of family drama and psychology suggests that people's unresolved childhood pain and confusion can, unfortunately, lead to lives in which many of their emotional needs remain misunderstood and unfulfilled. The relationship between mother and son becomes more and more unhealthier over time and assumes an Oedipal aspect. Gertrude Morel had had a tragic end. She was diagnosed with a tumour, and she was unable to bear her pain. The son whom she helped recover from pneumonia, along with his sister gave her overdose of morphine which caused her ultimate death. Her death is more than an irony itself.

Many readers have had the uneasy sense that the novel *Sons and Lovers* is in some way "unjust" to Mrs. Morel. Paul's mother is indeed an incomparably richer source of sympathy than his father. Lawrence's sympathetic portrayal of Mrs. Morel, as a woman who is left miserable after sacrificing her life for the sake of convention and domesticity, reveals that the reality of women's work and women's rights is far different than social norms suggest. Terry Eagleton considers that *Sons and Lovers* is also in general more "inward" in its treatment of Mrs. Morel than it is of her husband; "*indeed we might argue that it is organized in a way which tends to highlight her and obscure him, a formal device which reinforces the protagonist's own attitudes*" (153).

4. The Shame of Love or Love-Hate Relationship

"L'homme normal aime la rose malgré les épines..." Such as the complex circumstances that evoke human emotions from romantic love to the love of a long-married couple or the love of a neighbour or street person, these stories also show how misunderstanding, prejudice, abuse of power, and jealousy tear people apart and destroy our lives. In D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, it is much more a matter of love-hate relationship. The couple Morel/Gertrude has completely lost the intimacy within a loving relationship, yet still retains some passion for, or perhaps some commitment to each other. Gertrude Morel for example "*felt scorn for her husband, but she was tied to him*" (2).

As a reminder, the first chapter of *Sons and Lovers* opens with the early married life of the Morels and traces back how Gertrude and Walter met at a Christmas party, and she loved him not knowing that he was lying about himself. They both get married, and eventually, Gertrude gets to know within the few days of marriage about the betrayal of her husband and his poverty. Walter Morel is a miner, an alcoholic and doesn't own the house in which they live.

In the seventh month of their marriage, when she was brushing her husband's coat, she discovered in the pockets the bills for the furniture; they were still unpaid. When she asked further, she discovered that Morel not only didn't own their furniture, he didn't own the house that they lived in,

either; it was his mother's, and he paid her rent. She said very little to her husband but her manner towards him changed. Something in her proud soul became as hard as rock (5).

We might start by thinking about ways in which the novel deals with the question of love-hate relationship. Morel's failure to provide financial support serves as a red flag for low-quality parental relationships as the parents kept on quarreling. The Morel family is defined by conflict and division, which begin with the unhappy marriage of Mr. Morel and Mrs. Morel. She soon finds, however, that she and her husband have little in common and that the life of a miner's wife is one of hardship and poverty. And they often have argued over his alcoholic nature. Gertrude often tells her boys that she has been into an unhappy marriage and she makes her sons the center of her attention. But her morality is prevalent when, despite having an unwanted relationship, she nursed her husband Walter when he broke his leg. *"During his illness, his wife had spoiled him like a baby; now he wanted her to continue, and pretended that he felt worse than he really did. At first it amused her, but later it made her angry, and he had to admit that his health was improving"* (19).

Social relations and processes are then appropriated by individuals only through the forms in which they are represented to those individuals. If Morel didn't show too much affection at home, it was not very much his fault. If fact, he has been somehow excluded due to the influence of his wife over their children so that his level of involvement in family issues radically downgraded. *"Morel was shut out from the family affairs. No one told him anything. For the children, nothing had really happened to them until they had told their mother about it, but as soon as their father came in, all conversation stopped"* (24). He seems bitter and angry, which would show weakness.

Morel as the head, the patriarch is not free enough. He has neither goodness nor dignity, neither humor nor self-control. He is nothing but a harassed paterfamilias, and his love of his wife is entirely egotistical, without any understanding of her individual nature. She commits the most shameful acts. She loves Morel with extreme passion; yet her desire to enjoy a life of wealth and to shine makes her betray her feelings for him. A situation which enables husband and wife to hurt each other deeply, as the struggle of two creatures fettered to each other, as deceit and betrayal in their partnership.

The novel also deals with the theme of bondage and free will. Gertrude freely chose to marry Walter and consequently had to remain in the bondage of an alcoholic husband and an unhappy life. Despite the fact that she hated her relationship with her husband, she was unable to leave him. *"She sat shaking slightly, but her heart was full of scorn. What would she do if he went to another pit, was given work there, and met another woman? She knew him too well—he couldn't yet her heart was anxious"* (17). Mrs. Morel often worries about her husband's safety when he is at work or does not return at the usual time. Although she generally assumes that he is out drinking, she worries about what

will happen to herself and the children if her husband is killed, since he supports the family financially.

In addition, many of the psychological conflicts in *Sons and Lovers* take place unconsciously and are not obvious to the characters. Paul and Mrs. Morel are driven by underlying needs and desires rather than explicit knowledge of themselves. For example, throughout his relationship with Miriam, Paul is often confused as to why he cannot fully “give himself” to her. Paul is even hurt when Miriam displays insight into his psychology during one of his many attempts to break up with her. Miriam says bitterly that their whole relationship has been Paul “fighting her off”; Paul feels that Miriam has “always known” and understood his emotional condition, while he himself has not, and that she has spitefully concealed the truth from him. This suggests that it is sometimes easier to gain insight into others than it is to examine oneself, especially when one has inherited psychological confusion from a tumultuous family life.

Similarly, Mrs. Morel does not consciously know that she prevents her sons from being successful in love because her love for them is so possessive and links emotion to unreason. Indeed, Mrs. Morel believes that she wishes Paul would marry “a nice girl” and is never aware that she is the aspect of his life that stops him from doing so. Her lack of awareness implies that, the condition of being “fond”, being without or outside of reason would speculate on psychological problems in others, because it is harder to address conflicts in one’s own emotional life. Paul is the receiver of most of his mother’s deep emotional feelings and has with her a bond tighter than normal. Because of this, Paul has trouble handling and being comfortable with his own relationships. Henry Ibsen addresses the fact in the following terms:

“It’s not just what we inherit from our mothers and fathers that haunts us. It’s all kinds of old defunct theories, all sorts of old defunct beliefs, and things like that. It’s not that they actually live on in us, they are simply lodged there, and we cannot get rid of them. I’ve only to pick up a newspaper and I seem to see ghosts gliding between the lines” (1828-1906).

So it is not surprising that we should find Lawrence, in his wonderful essay “*The Novel and the Feelings*”, saying that love is “like a woolly lamb, or like a decorative decadent panther in Paris clothes” (depending on the degree of sexuality involved), hate is like “a dog chained to a kennel”, fear is a “shivering monkey”, anger is a bull, greed is a pig, and so on (1985: 93).

5. Conclusion

Son and Lovers is primarily a study of human relationships even though the book has a number of conflicts. When we read the novel, we are expected to identify ourselves with one of the characters: that is to say, to live through the happenings of the story—the complex relationship between parents and their children through the Oedipus complex, the failure of the parental relationship,

hardship and poverty. The most striking feature of Lawrence's characters is the resemblance that so many of them bear to their creator. Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers* is clearly projection of himself. In his other characters there are many similarities. They share his bitterness and darkness of spirit, and like him they live passionately and fully.

D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* is considered by in the best of all his work. For this reason, George Sampson (1946) says:

"To men and women of very different kinds Lawrence conveyed an unquestionable sense of personal genius, and in most of them that faith was not destroyed by egocentric behavior of the utmost ruthlessness". (1946: 972).

As we have attempted to show, at the heart of the novel *Sons and Lovers* is love. For Lawrence, love as a passion cannot answer to rationality or reason. Lawrence is, then, the prophet of the primitive instincts and passions; his own appeal is to the heart rather than the head. He seeks to persuade, not by the reasoning faculty, but by the emotional impact of his writing. The basic view is that true love is never selfish by arguing that human relations are relations of exchanges. Then Gertrude develops this bondage for her sons. She influences every instance of their life. Her choice of disliking for their lovers leaves her sons in a constant perplexing thought. As a consequence, she at the end of the novel did not only ruin her own life but three lives in this novel, Walter's, William's, and Paul's. After the death of his wife Gertrude, Morel spent his life with regrets.

The author of *sons and lovers* knows what marriage is, he knows the bad side of it, and the good side too. Love can be a tremendous source of strength, but it can also become a force/source for evil. For Edward (1979: p. 511), Lawrence used the novel to present to his reader his own interpretation of life; both writers were concerned with the basic problems of human existence, man's relationships with his fellows and with the universe beyond himself. As so, the novel renders everyday life or at least one of its most important spheres that of marriage and family life, in all its sensory reality, and takes this everyday subject seriously and indeed problematically.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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