

SONS AND LOVERS



In Sons and Lovers Lawrence explores what he considered to be the destructive forms of love. Love, he recognizes, is a union between the sexes; but when it is made extreme by excess, either of thinking (over-spirituality) or of feeling (possessiveness), it can thwart the relation between man and woman. Lawrence's chief preoccupation in this novel is the destructive effects of unbalanced-spirituality, and possessiveness. Excessive spiritual love has already been dramatized in The White Peacock and The Trespasser; but, in Sons and Lovers it is discussed fully in the relation between Paul Morel and Miriam Leivers. In addition, possessive love is regarded as counterfeit and destructive because, with the absorption of the beloved's soul, it kills the essential life of the individual, and this is seen in the relations between Mr. Morel and his wife, and Mrs. Morel and her son-lovers. Possessive love is inevitable, he feels, since women have the motherly instincts to possess, and their feminine possessiveness is revealed even in their attitude toward flowers.³¹

Aroused by the dangers of feminine possessiveness and excessive spirituality, Lawrence examines the lives of his characters throughout the novel and asks the same question repeatedly: "What is, what ought to be, what shall be the most vital relation between man and woman?"

The question first arises with the relation between Walter Morel and his wife. It is a relationship based on conflicts. These conflicts arise from the characters' different backgrounds and feminine possessiveness. Mr. Morel and his wife are different from each other, both by temperament and upbringing. She is puritanical, high-minded and educated; she came from "a good old burgher family, famous independents who had fought with Colonel Hutchinson, and who remained stout Congregationalists."³² Mrs. Morel is an intellectual; she likes to read a good deal and loves ideas. What she likes most of all is an argument on philosophy or religion or politics with some educated man, while Mr. Morel, a son of a miner, is illiterate and sensuous. His life is physical; he works in the pit, tinkering with innumerable little odd jobs at home, drinking and talking and sometimes taking long walks with his mates. He lives out his life as sensuously as he can, taking the enjoyment and refusing to accept any domestic responsibility. The differences and oppositions in characters are attractive features when they first meet at a dance in Nottingham. To the miner Morel, she is a thing of mystery, a lady; and he is equally an object of fascination. She is struck by his vividness - his wavy black hair and vigorous black beard, ruddy cheek and red, moist mouth - and by his rich, ringing laugh and his humor, that is soft, non-intellectual, warm, kind of gambolling. He is dashing and gay, a clever dancer, a type that

she has never met before:

Therefore the dusky golden softness of this man's sensuous flame of life, that flowed off his flesh like the flame from a candle, not baffled and gripped into incandescence by thought and spirit as her life was, seemed to her something wonderful, beyond her.³³

Also, his work in the pit sounds romantic to her. Motivated by romance she marries him, but knows nothing of the life conditions of a miner's wife. However, she has been deceived into thinking that he is better than he really is. They are, therefore, an ill-matched couple whose love is only a romantic delusion.

Very soon the contrast that drew them together shows its liabilities. Mrs. Morel finds that the disparity in education and outlook destroys any understanding between them: "his nature was purely sensuous, and she strove to make him religious."³⁴ It is impossible for the illiterate miner to understand his wife's intellectual interests, and to conform to her puritanism. He likes to stay at the pub after his hard work in the pit. For him the pub means human warmth and comradeship, a respite from work and worry; but for her it is an evil place where men lose their contact with God. Besides, he has no sense of home responsibilities; she discovers unpaid bills, and detects him in lies and evasions. Too much a Puritan - part of her inheritance - and too full of her high moral sense to leave Mr. Morel to do what he likes, she tries to remake him through continual opposition

and ridicule. Driven to fierceness by her realization that she had once loved this man, she bullies him with Puritanical strictures. She drives him to drunkenness, lying, cowardice, and then castigates him for sinning. Discontented with what her husband is and anxious to have him change, she destroys him while trying to ennoble him: "she could not be content with the little he might be; she would have him the much that he ought to be. So, in seeking to make him nobler than he could be, she destroyed him."³⁵

Thus, because of her possessive love, he gradually becomes a complete outsider - a shadowy householder who emerges from the mines only to disappear into the bars, and degenerates into an irresponsible drunkard, who ruins himself both physically and mentally by over-drinking:

There was a slight shrinking, a diminishing in his assurance. Physically even, he shrank, and his fine full presence waned. He never grew in the least stout, so that, as he sank from his erect assertive bearing, his physique seemed to contract along with his pride and moral strength.³⁶

Yet Mrs. Morel continues to strive with him - to possess him. Too much himself to accede to his wife's demands, Mr. Morel resists as much as he can. And this aggravates their sterile relationship.

When the first child is born, Mrs. Morel already is bitterly disillusioned, and feels that she has married the wrong man. She gives the boy some of the love she once gave to her husband. A second child is born; but all the time her passion for Mr. Morel is ebbing away, so that she dreads the

arrival of the third child, and at its birth she feels that she and her husband are guilty of having another child when they no longer love each other:

In her arms lay the delicate boy. Its deep blue eyes, always looking up at her unblinking, seemed to draw her innermost thoughts out of her. She no longer loved her husband; she had not wanted this child to come, and there it lay in her arms and pulled at her heart. She felt as if the navel string that had connected its frail little body with hers had not been broken. A wave of hot love went over her to the infant. She held it close to her face and breast. With all her force, with all her soul she would make up to it for having brought it into the world unbeloved. She would love it all the more now it was here; carry it in her love, its clear, knowing eyes gave her pain and fear. Did it know all about her? When it lay under her heart, had it been listening then? Was there a reproach in the look? She felt the marrow melt in her bones, with fear and pain.³⁷

Thus, Mrs. Morel comes to believe that the children are only the accidental result of their unsatisfactory relationship. Mr. Morel, for his part, acts as if he disliked their children: he bullies and torments them. Eventually all the children, seeing him with their mother's eyes, are united against him. They are on Mrs. Morel's side, and hate the brutal father, who, once, for example, flings a drawer from the dresser at his wife, and a corner hits her brow so badly that it almost stuns her. Only occasionally when he is happy in mending a kettle or in cobbling boots, do they love any contact with him.

With the purpose of taking revenge on her undefeated husband, Mrs. Morel soon draws the whole love of her quick passionate children to herself, withdrawing them from their father, making them despise him as a "common" working man,

and forbears them to speak dialect like Mr. Morel.³⁸ She determines that her children will not work in the pit, but should get "superior" jobs as clerks. Mr. Morel, however, does not worry about what she has done to him, and her Puritanism and civilized manner have no effect on him. He prefers to eat his food with a clasp-knife and drink his tea from the saucer, and persists "in his dirty and disgusting way, just to assert his independence."³⁹ And "he made the meal alone, brutally. He ate and drank more noisily than he had need. No one spoke to him. The family life withdrew, shrank away, and became hushed as he entered. But he cared no longer about his alienation."⁴⁰ His only answer is to meet Mrs. Morel's gentility with his exaggerated vulgarity. Thus, the conflict continues, and the children have to live in an atmosphere of struggle between parents. It is a conflict between vitality, which is often mindless and brutal, and gentility, often intelligent and sensitive - a kind of class warfare, bourgeoisie and proletariat. Every night the children have a feeling of terror. This terror comes from the shrieking of the great ash-tree outside the house, and from the violent battle of their parents:

(They heard) the booming shouts of the father, come home nearly drunk, then the sharp replies of their mother, then the bang, bang of the father's fist on the table, and the nasty snarling shout as the man's voice got higher. And then the whole was drowned in a piercing medley of shrieks and cries from the great, wind-swept ash-tree. The children lay silent in suspense, waiting for a lull in the

wind to hear what their father was doing. He might hit their mother again. There was a feeling of horror, a kind of bristling in the darkness.⁴¹

In spite of these conflicts, as a note of irony, the children never think of their home as mean and do not suffer too much from the struggle between their parents: "Home was home, and they loved it with a passion of love, whatever the suffering had been."⁴² They think that the cottage is "nice" and the kitchen "homelike", and although the furniture is like that in other working-class houses, they feel there is something about the house which makes it different from those of the neighbors.

However, the relationship between Mr. Morel and his wife is shown as a failure. Because Mrs. Morel is intensely possessive, she does not respect her husband's individuality, but, because of her moral tightness, a Puritanical strain that kills life, tries to make him better than he really is. In order to preserve his independence Mr. Morel fights against her desperately. He becomes a bully, a freak and a drunkard, a type that she hates. With her possessive love, Mrs. Morel is like a harpy, set on tearing the man she loves into pieces, destroying his personality, and absorbing his being into her own. She wants to draw from her husband his greatest possession - his manhood, his masculinity - and tries to feminize him and bring him under the control of her will.⁴³ Mr. Morel, like all Laurentian heroes, hates feminine possessiveness, and the more his wife tries to possess him the more violently

he reacts. He does not want to be her instrument, used for producing children, but does want her to treat him as an individual with his own integrity of being. When she cannot do this, he rebels against her; and their relationship stands as a failure.

Failing to possess her husband Mrs. Morel turns to her sons for husband-substitutes.⁴⁴ William, the eldest, is the first victim. Because of his psychic bond with Mrs. Morel, he cannot establish a deep relationship with other women. William, although he loves Lilly whom he meets at a dance in the town, always feels that he belongs to his mother only. Split into parts, he cannot leave Lilly because of her physical appeal, or his mother because "he was accustomed to have all his thoughts sifted through his mother's mind."⁴⁵ Thus William as a unified person is destroyed; divided into pieces, he drives himself into a life whose substance he can neither order nor even understand. Destroyed young by his mother, he dies under her care: his death is actually caused by pneumonia, but symbolically by Mrs. Morel's possessiveness.⁴⁶ Shortly after William's death, Mrs. Morel captures Paul's spirit, making him the successor to his elder brother in her affections. Her influence on Paul is seen in Paul's relation to Miriam.

In the relationship between Paul Morel and Miriam Leivers, Lawrence shows love thwarted by the girl's spiritual nature and possessiveness, and asks us to consider whether theirs

is a proper man-woman relationship. Paul and Miriam are drawn to each other by their mutual needs. Miriam sees herself as a romantic heroine, the swine-girl who was really a princess; but since she cannot be a princess by birth or wealth, she determines to distinguish herself by education. Paul helps her to reach her goal by teaching her algebra and French, and he also persuades Mr. Leivers, her father, to send Miriam to school. As for Paul, he feels that Miriam can stimulate his imagination and creative impulses:

He was conscious only when he was stimulated...there was for him the most intense pleasure in talking about his work to Miriam. All his passion, all his wild blood went into this intercourse with her when he talked and conceived his work. She brought forth to him his imagination.⁴⁷

Because of this Paul agrees to teach Miriam algebra and French everyday. But he is an impatient teacher; once in his rage he throws his pencil in her face; she, by contrast, is patient and instead of flying at him like a wild cat, follows her lesson silently. However, her gesture makes him "bitterly ashamed," and perhaps this is her first step towards losing him. Although he is strongly drawn to her, Paul cannot love her chiefly because he is afraid of feminine love which, from his mother, he feels is only possessiveness. Thus, when he notices that Miriam loves him, he tries to avoid her. Paul wants their friendship to be on the level of her "clear simple wits," where he knows he is safe and he is her master, since by education she is inferior to him. He leaves her ostentatiously to go off with Edgar, her brother, who, quite

opposite to her, is a rationalist and has "a sort of scientific interest in life."⁴⁸ Then he comes back to her again - not for her sake or in acknowledgement of her love but because her presence stimulates his creative impulses. Paul, however, always feels that Miriam wants "the soul out of his body and not him."⁴⁹ Like Mrs. Morel, Miriam is intensely possessive, but while Mrs. Morel's possessiveness is seen in her love of her sons, Miriam's, as Paul notices it, is shown in her attitude toward flowers. Seeing beautiful daffodils in the garden at Willey Farm, Miriam suddenly kneels down to kiss and fondle them lavishly. Paul, who is looking at her, remarks violently:

Can you never like things without clutching them as if you wanted to pull the heart out of them?...

You wheedle the soul out of things...I would never at any rate, I'd go straight....

You're always begging things to love you... as if you were a beggar for love. Even the flowers, you have to fawn on them...⁵⁰

Paul feels that Miriam does not want love, but wants to be loved. She loves flowers not in themselves but as possessions, as beauty which she can control. He sees the relationship of the girl to the flowers is that of a blasphemous possessiveness which denies the separateness of living entities - the desire to break down boundaries between thing and thing.⁵¹ And he feels that she loves him as she loves flowers, she worships him as she worships them, and Paul feels suffocated by such adoration. Miriam's possessiveness is revealed more when she goes to Paul's house where she

searches his things as if they belonged to her. And "he hated her as she bent forward and pored over his things. He hated her way of patiently casting him up, as if he were an endless psychological account. When he was with her, he hated her for having got him."⁵²

Later in his emotional struggle, Paul goes in the garden and looks at the flowers, and here his relation to them is quite different from Miriam's:

Nearer, a dim white fence of lilies went across the garden, and the air all round seemed to stir with scent, as if it were alive. He went across the bed of pinks, whose keen perfume came sharply across the rocking, heavy scent of the lilies, and stood alongside the white barrier of flowers. They flagged all loose, as if they were parting....Behind him the great flowers leaned as if they were calling. And then, like a shock, he caught another perfume, something raw and coarse. Hunting around, he found the purple iris, touched their fleshy throats and their dark, grasping hands. At any rate, he had found something. They stood still in the darkness. Their scent was brutal...⁵³

He sees that the lilies have an "otherness" establishing them as existence in their own right, as separate, strange selves, and the demiurgic Eros is rudely insistent in their scent. Paul's perception of that independent life puts him into relation with himself. The "something" that he finds is simply the iris, dark, fleshy, mysterious, alien.⁵⁴ Being aware of his own being, Paul suddenly decides to break off with Miriam who has, he notices, the motherly instincts to possess. "You love me so much," he tells her, "you want to put me in your pocket. And I shall die emothered."⁵⁵ Love, he recognizes, is necessary, but too much love can

cause death or strangulation. And thus he refuses to accept Miriam's devouring love.

Apart from Miriam's possessiveness Paul's intense attachment to his mother and Miriam's spiritual nature are also responsible for the failure of their relationship. Paul, tied as he is to Mrs. Morel, always feels that he belongs to his mother only and cannot give himself entirely either to Miriam or to other women: "The deepest of his love for her, he couldn't bear it."⁵⁶ His mother makes it psychologically impossible for him to have any sexual relations with Miriam, who is like his mother, spiritual and religious. Miriam is so religious that "she might have been one of the women who went with Mary when Jesus was dead. Her body was not flexible and being."⁵⁷ She is victimized by her mother into the conviction that "there is one thing in marriage that is always dreadful, but you have to bear it." And I believed it."⁵⁸ In Miriam's presence, "it could never be mentioned that the mare was in foal."⁵⁹ Even "the continual business of birth and begetting"⁶⁰ on the farm is considered by her as something shameful and disgusting. Being a nun-like woman, she tries to put her friendship with Paul on a purely spiritual level and attempts to make him religious like her. Influenced by Miriam, Paul becomes chaste, and though he desires her, he dare not make love to her: "The fact that he might want her as a man wants a woman had in him been suppressed into a shame."⁶¹ For him, Miriam is only "the threshing

floor on which he thresh(es) out all his beliefs,"⁶² and that is all.

Frustrated by his relation with the nun-like Miriam, Paul goes to Clara for satisfying his physical needs. Miriam does not try to win Paul back because she is sure that her hold on Paul's "higher" nature, his soul, will prevail over his desires for "lower" things - Clara's body. And she is right, for he, a few months later, returns to her again: "He believed himself really bound to Miriam. If ever he should marry sometime in the future, it would be his duty to marry Miriam."⁶³ But this time, he demands "the great hunger and impersonality of passion"⁶⁴ from her, and though she agrees to this, she decides to submit herself to him religiously, as if to a sacrifice. No wonder then that in their physical consummation she is unresponsive, and though their love-making becomes more frequent, she continues to clench herself for the "sacrifice." Even at the most relaxed moment of her sexual relation with Paul, Miriam's "spirituality" extends, however, to the world outside sex. Her religious intensities characterize the simplest acts. Paul, frustrated and ashamed, finally decides to give up Miriam completely. He feels that she is only his "conscience" not his "mate"; he cannot take her as his wife or mistress. He wants a woman whom he can kiss and embrace and make the mother of his children. Miriam's excessive spirituality destroys

her own capacity to respond, sympathetically, to Paul's need for sensual love.⁶⁵ After Mrs. Morel's death, they meet again, but she is still as spiritual and possessive as before. Paul now becomes a "derelict" (as Lawrence entitled the final chapter), and wants her to respond to him out of womanly instincts. But she can only offer him the old familiar sacrifice and motherly possessive love. Because of the stifling nature of Miriam's love, Paul rejects her. "He did not hope to give life to her by denying his own."⁶⁶ For her part, Miriam knows that "without him, her life would trail on lifeless."⁶⁷ But she feels that she cannot offer him what he wants - sensual love. For Paul, he feels that to live alone with his own independence is much better than to receive the "sacrifice" from Miriam everyday and to be possessed by her. Miriam's failure is caused by her own excessive spirituality. She feeds wholly on the spirit and an abstract love, and because of it she treats Paul not as a man of flesh-and-blood but as a mind or soul.⁶⁸

Another kind of man-woman relationship which Lawrence examines in Sons and Lovers is a relationship based only on sensual love. This is illustrated by the relations between Paul Morel and Clara Dawes. Paul is drawn to Clara by her physical appeal and warmth. Although, when he first meets her she is rather cold to him. He can sense that her aloofness is just a defensive pose, used to protect herself from

men. For her part, she admires his animal quickness: he, young and lively, brings her the promise of renewed vitality, and they draw close together and make love. From Clara, Paul can get the impersonal love that he needs, "the real, real flame of feeling through another person,"⁶⁹ and Clara, who has failed with her husband, feels warm and alive by Paul's love. Even Mrs. Morel is not against her because Mrs. Morel knows that Clara does not demand Paul's soul as Miriam did. And Clara's visit to the Morel household is satisfactory. "It was a clear, cool atmosphere, where everyone was himself and in harmony."⁷⁰

Paul's relationship with Clara shows his attempt at a simple relationship as a relief from the psychic complexities of the love between him and Miriam. Yet, he cannot give himself completely to Clara; tied as he is to Mrs. Morel, he can never "really love another woman." Clara, although she gives him sexual satisfaction, cannot hold onto the real and vital Paul. Moreover, Clara defeats herself by her own possessiveness. She is soon dissatisfied with impersonal love; like Miriam, she wants to possess Paul personally: "...Clara was not satisfied...she thought it was he whom she wanted... she had not got him; she was not satisfied."⁷¹ This is the impulse towards personal possessiveness; it is a denial of the otherness through which people have their independent definition as well as their creative community. Clara tries

to show that Paul belongs to her only by pressing him for little intimacies during the daytime, i.e. she asks Paul to accompany her everywhere she goes, and introduces him to the people they meet as her lover. Paul shrinks away from this: "The night is free to you," he says. "In the daytime I want to be myself..."⁷² Besides, Paul feels that he is beyond her in his creative and intellectual self; Clara, however, is different from Mrs. Morel and Miriam, and she cannot share his intellectual interests. For her part, Clara cannot get physical fulfillment from him, and he never realizes that she, a woman, needs to be satisfied as well as he, a man, needs to be relieved.⁷³ Clara finally returns to her husband whom she does not love, but who lets himself be possessed. She fails with Paul because of her own possessiveness.

For the second time, Paul fails to establish a satisfactory relationship with another woman. Once again he returns to his mother, whose illness (caused by cancer) makes him feel "as if his life was being destroyed, piece by piece, within him."⁷⁴ When his agony becomes too great as his mother's suffering increases, Paul, with his sister's approval, kills her with an overdose of morphine to spare his mother's agony. This action is described realistically as an act of mercy-killing; the suggestion is, symbolically, he wants to be free from her unbreakable bond and to make his mother free from the psychic relation between them. Only her death can liberate both of them from this complex relationship.⁷⁵ Mrs. Morel's

death, however, affects him very much. For many years his life has been only with her; they have lived in one another, and no woman, neither Miriam nor Clara, has been able to take her place. Paul, now a derelict, is alone in the fields outside Nottingham and wants only to follow his mother towards her grave:

But no, he would not give in. Turning sharply, he walked towards the city's gold phosphorescence. His fists were shut, his mouth set fast. He would not take that direction, to the darkness, to follow her. He walked towards the faintly humming, glowing town, quickly.⁷⁶

Paul refuses to give in to his mother. Her death, of course, is the greatest of disasters, but it is also equally the greatest of liberations; he can keep his independence alive, and that is what he should be proud of. Paul, son-lover, is dead as a son and from now on he can be a real lover who is able to give himself wholly to any woman he loves.

The relations of the three pairs of lovers, Mr. Morel and his wife, Paul and Miriam, and Paul and Clara, are illustrations of the disturbance of the vital relation between men and women by possessiveness, first seen in Mrs. Morel's attempt to possess her husband and her sons, then in the endeavor of Miriam and Clara to impose their imprisoning personal love on Paul. The love of these three women denies "otherness" or the complete and terminal individuality of persons, and therefore, their love forfeits the elements of a true feeling which would build, while theirs destroys and debilitates. Mrs. Morel's possessive love drives her

husband into desperate drunkenness, and makes William and Paul Morel unable to love normally when they come to manhood, because she holds their spirit. And when William tries to escape her clutch, he is killed. As for Paul, his mother's possessiveness makes him unable to come to terms with any woman except for physical necessity. He cannot give Miriam or Clara his "wholeness," since his spirit is in Mrs. Morel. What he can offer them is only the flesh; but Miriam, because of her excessive spirituality, is also off-balance, and that is the chief cause of their failure. Clara agrees to be taken physically, but the flesh without the spirit is as futile as spirit alone, and thus their relationship stands as a failure. For Lawrence, the flesh is equally important as the spirit (intellect), and the two together will bring out the god-hero in man, will dignify him, and will enable him to flower in himself.⁷⁷ This combination of the two elements becomes the main theme of The Rainbow.