

D. H. LAWRENCE'S
SONS AND LOVERS

**FAMILY, PSYCHOLOGY,
AND THE OEDIPUS
COMPLEX**

D. H. Lawrence's novel *Sons and Lovers* examines 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. Many of the conflicts in *Sons and Lovers* are driven by underlying psychological forces, which even the characters themselves do not understand. This makes it difficult for them to respond in ways that help, rather than worsen, their situations. Lawrence was interested in psychology and loosely incorporates aspects of Freud's Oedipus complex into the plot of the novel.

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 Morel family is defined by conflict and division, which begin with the unhappy marriage of Mr. Morel and Mrs. Morel. Mrs. Morel, a young English woman from a "good family," marries Mr. Morel after she meets him at a country dance. 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. Their relationship quickly becomes volatile and Mr. and Mrs. Morel never emotionally reconcile. Their children side with their mother against their father, and the rift within the family foreshadows the conflicts that the children, especially William and Paul, will psychologically inherit. This legacy of conflict and division is continued by William and Paul in their relationships with women.

Both William and Paul rely on their mother well into adulthood for emotional guidance, psychological support, and personal validation. When they try to build relationships with women their own age, they are divided within themselves because they feel disloyal to their mother, who often resents these women. This split is most clearly represented in Paul's relationships with Miriam and Clara, which are depicted as a "battle;" Miriam, on one side, feels she owns "Paul's soul," while with Clara he experiences physical passion.

This divide between body and soul, which Paul can never reconcile, stands in for the most significant psychological tension in his life: his strong attachment to his mother. The force of their bond means that Paul constantly feels that he must choose between her and his lovers and, because of their deep familial connection, Paul ultimately sides with his mother and eventually casts off Miriam and Clara, which leaves him rootless and alone after Mrs. Morel's death. The repetition of such toxic psychological patterns throughout the novel suggests the power of early familial bonds and implies that these forces often direct decisions made in later life. If these early familial experiences are divisive or volatile, Paul's experience indicates, this can lead to the continuation of disruptive or unfulfilling relationships in adulthood.

The novel's overall theme of twisted family psychologies is most prominent in the somewhat ambiguous relationship between Paul and his mother. Although there is no explicitly sexual relationship between Paul and Mrs. Morel, their relationship nonetheless reflects Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex. Paul and Mrs. Morel do not consider their relationship incestuous, but there are several incidents which suggest that their relationship makes other suspicious. For example, it is noted that they often "sleep together" in the same bed and when Mr. Morel walks in on them kissing, he complains that they are "up to their mischief." Incidents like these imply that their relationship is Oedipal in a Freudian sense and contains elements of inappropriate desire.

This parallel is further implied by Paul's relationship with Clara and her estranged husband, Baxter Dawes. Paul is drawn to Baxter and, even though he dislikes him, he craves his respect. Baxter is very like Paul's father and Clara is similar to Paul's mother. After the death of his mother, Paul loses interest in Clara and encourages her and Baxter to reunite. This sequence of events suggests that Paul acts out his parents' reunion, which never actually occurred, through Clara and Baxter.

The ending, in which Paul leaves Clara and Baxter together and goes off by himself into the night, symbolizes Paul being forced at last to progress beyond the Oedipal phase of his childhood in which he was trapped while his mother was alive. Just as Mrs. Morel transferred her love from her husband onto her sons, Paul transfers his desire to sexually fulfill his mother onto Clara and Baxter. However, just like his mother, this does not help Paul; it only leads him to confusion and desolation at the novel's end. Through Paul's fate, the novel suggests that one must gain psychological insight into oneself, rather than making one's problems external and seeking resolution through others.

Christianity, Propriety, and Physicality

Christianity was an important aspect of life in Britain in the early 1900s, when *Sons and Lovers* is set, and Lawrence uses frequent references to Biblical stories to underpin much of the action of the novel. However, when paired with social notions of propriety (which were standard in this period in Britain and which encouraged celibacy outside of marriage), Christian beliefs disrupt the lives of the characters by discouraging them from exploring their physical urges and desires. Lawrence believed that physical sensation was a manifestation of the divine, and that through bodily experiences human beings could achieve spiritual transcendence which united them with God. Accordingly, the novel argues that Christian belief, when it discounts the importance of the physical world in favor of the purely spiritual, is a source of confusion and emotional pain rather than fulfillment.

Although Christianity might seem like a source of insight, in the novel it is symbolic of false revelation and confusion rather than guidance. Paul, Mrs. Morel's second son and the main protagonist of the novel, is associated with the Biblical figure of St. Paul. This association begins when Paul is a baby and Mrs. Morel lifts him up to show him the sun. This parallels St. Paul's revelation on the way to Damascus, when he was struck temporarily blind and received a revelation from God. However, while in the biblical episode St. Paul's blinding leads to religious understanding, Mrs. Morel holds baby Paul up to the sun because she is worried that he understands too much—specifically, that he already understands the pain of life, which she feels he has learned because of her unhappiness while pregnant. As she looks into the baby's eyes, she feels that he has learned something which "stunned" a part of his soul and she holds him to the light to dazzle this revelation away. This moment reverses the meaning of the biblical episode and signifies the beginning of emotional confusion, or blindness, in Paul's life.

The image of the blinding light is repeated later in the novel, when Paul sees the orange moon when he is at the beach with Miriam, his lover, whom he is striving unsuccessfully for sexual connection with. He knows that Miriam, who is very religious and averse to sex and physical sensation, expects him to feel a moment of spiritual connection with her at the sight of the moon. Paul, again, is "struck" by the image but cannot understand the emotion he feels – his desire is sexual, and therefore Miriam rejects it. Paul cannot connect with Miriam through spirituality alone and yearns for physical connection. Therefore, the restrictions of religion obstruct Paul's attempt to form a bond with Miriam and takes him further away from emotional and spiritual clarity, rather than towards it.

Women's Work and Women's Rights

Throughout the novel, Paul's attitude towards women is defined by his love for his mother, Mrs. Morel, which leads him to compare his female lovers with her. Since Paul's love for his mother is rooted in idealism and not in reality, the other women in his life, Clara and Miriam, cannot compare with Paul's romantic idea of how women should be, and they find themselves cast aside by Paul as they fail to live up to his impossible expectations. The story is set in the early twentieth century, during a period in which rights for women and societal expectations placed on women were gradually changing. Paul's inability to understand the women in his life mirrors society's failure to respect women during this period. Through Paul and his relationships with women, the novel suggests that social attitudes need to change so that women can find fulfillment in life and equality in society and relationships.

Paul believes that his mother has lived a fulfilling life and that, because she has dedicated her life to the domestic sphere of childrearing, she has been happy. Paul's experience of his mother is defined by her devotion to him. Mrs. Morel "casts off" her husband, Mr. Morel, early in their marriage, when he cuts her older son William's hair without her permission. After this event, Mrs. Morel turns her affections solely onto her children, and almost exclusively onto Paul when William dies in his twenties. Since Mrs. Morel shows such affection towards Paul and such investment in the pursuits of his life, he believes that she lives happily *through* him. This belief mirrors social attitudes towards women at the time, which insisted that, rather than cultivating interests or passions of their own, women should be happy to live through their male family members—their husbands and sons—to achieve society's standard of ideal womanhood.

While Paul knows that Mrs. Morel does not love her husband, he believes that she has known “passion” with Paul himself and that this has brought her fulfillment. 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. The harsh reality of Mrs. Morel’s life suggests that Paul’s attitude towards his mother, and by extension all women, reflects society’s idealized, unrealistic belief that women should be completely satisfied by domestic life.

Mrs. Morel's death causes a crisis of faith in Paul because he sees, for the first time, that his mother has not been happy. While Paul expects her to die gracefully, as someone who has lived a fulfilling and meaningful life, Mrs. Morel's death is actually drawn out, bitter, and brooding, and Paul begins to see that she considers her life a waste. As her life has been so closely bound up with his, this realization shatters Paul's sense of self and his sense of his own importance as reflected through his mother. 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.

Meanwhile, his depiction of Paul as a confused and disillusioned young man at the novel's close suggests that old-fashioned and idealized depictions of women are not in the best interests of either women *or* of men. Paul's story demonstrates how men who expect women to be fulfilled by living vicariously through them, rather than having ambitions and passions of their own, will be left behind by the social changes beginning in this period.

Nature and Industrialism

Lawrence uses nature and the natural world to represent the inner lives of the characters throughout *Sons and Lovers*, suggesting that human beings are not separate from the natural world but rather extensions of it. Lawrence indicates that the closer and more harmonious the relationship between humans and the natural world, the happier and more fulfilling human lives will be. The further the characters travel from the natural world, the more unstable and unhappy their lives become, as the links between humans and their environment are weakened by processes such as industrialism, mass production, and the materialism of modernity.

Nature is a source of beauty, inspiration, hope, and human connection in the novel. The characters in *Sons and Lovers* are depicted as being at their best when they are surrounded by nature which has not been interfered with by the modern world. For example, after Mrs. Morel has a huge fight with her husband and has been locked out of the house, she comforts herself by looking at the moon and by smelling the flowers that are growing nearby. This suggests that harmony with nature brings harmony within oneself and, after this moment of calm, Mrs. Morel is able to return to her house and persuade her husband to let her back in, thereby making an attempt to heal the rift between them.

Another example of nature's role in human connection shows up in Paul's sexual relationships with Miriam and with Clara. Both begin in nature: in the woods with Miriam, and on the riverbank with Clara. What's more, Paul grows up surrounded by nature and is very sensitive and attuned to his environment. This leads him to his career as a painter, as he draws inspiration from the beauty of the natural world. Nature, therefore, is associated with self-expression. The fact that Paul's self-expression as a painter comes in the form of pictures of natural scenes suggests that to express oneself is also to express the natural world, again emphasizing that humans are part of nature and the environment.

Some industrial practices, such as mining, are still closely linked to nature in the novel, even though they represent human interference with the natural world. Although mining is an industrial process and relies on technology and machines, mining is still associated with nature because it is a process which extracts natural resources, and which relies on the land rather than producing something external to the natural world. 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.

The miners, like Mr. Morel, are also shaped by their environment, in the same way that Paul is shaped into an artist by his contact with nature. Mr. Morel prefers to sit in darkness even in the daytime because he is so used to operating in the natural darkness of the mine. Similarly, the bodies of the miners, which grow gradually hunched over time from crouching in the pits, reflect the idea that people's external environments play large roles in their internal lives.

Finally, those furthest from nature in the novel are people who live in the cities and who work in manufacturing, and these people generally end up alienated and unhappy. For example, Paul and William both leave the mining town and get jobs in the city. William takes a job in London, and Paul gets a job closer to home, in Nottingham. Both contract pneumonia because of the long hours, pollution, and poor working conditions in the cities, and William's death is ultimately associated with his rejection of nature in favor of a materialistic and modern lifestyle. Paul, in contrast, maintains his connection to the natural world and the beautiful countryside he grew up around. Therefore, he recovers from his illness and is eventually able to cut down his hours spent in the city.

Symbols in *Sons and Lovers*

Flowers:

Flowers symbolize femininity and female sexuality in *Sons and Lovers*. Women are referred to as flowers or compared with flowers throughout the novel. When William describes his many female admirers to Paul, he describes them as different flowers that live "like cut blooms in his heart." Although this may seem flattering to the women, it reflects the idea that William does not view these women as people, but instead views them as decorations, which offset his own appearance and stature. This attitude is confirmed during his relationship with Louisa Lily Denys Western, whom William views more as an accessory than a partner. Elsewhere in the novel, flowers signify female sexuality and incidents with flowers come to represent the different women in the novel and their attitudes towards sex. When Miriam shows Paul a rosebush she has found, and later a patch of daffodils, she treats the flowers reverently and with devotion, the same way she approaches her physical relationship with Paul.

Clara, in contrast, views flowers as “dead things” during the time when she is celibate after she has left Baxter Dawes. Later, when her sexuality is reawakened with Paul, he gives her a flower to wear on her coat and this symbolizes the rejuvenation of her physical life. When the flower is “smashed to pieces,” when they lie together on the ground, this suggests that Paul has broken through Clara’s external, decorative façade and formed a real connection with her through sex. The shattered flower also has connotations of spoiled virginity and this suggests that, although Paul thinks he is kind to Miriam and Clara, he is really shallow and careless with them, just as William was with the women that he collected like flowers without taking their feelings into account.

The Moon:

The moon is associated with motherhood in the novel and represents the oppressive bond that exists between Mrs. Morel and Paul. When Mrs. Morel is pregnant with Paul, she has a fight with her husband and is thrown out of the house. She goes into her garden and is surprised to find herself bathed in light from a full moon overhead. The presence of the moon soothes her and calms the child, Paul, who is "boiling within her," and this represents the love that Mrs. Morel will develop for Paul and her hopes for the future that she will invest in him. Later in the novel, this bond between Mrs. Morel and Paul becomes problematic because it infringes on Paul's ability to form a romantic relationship; he is so close to his mother that they are almost like lovers and she possesses him in a way his lovers cannot.

This is reflected again using the symbol of the moon in the scene in which Paul sees the large, orange moon above the beach when he is with Miriam and finds himself unable to understand or express the physical desire that she arouses in him. The moon is traditionally associated with femininity and this connects the moon to the idea of motherhood. The moon, however, does not create light but takes light in and reflects it back. This represents the circular and destructive nature of the love between Paul and Mrs. Morel. Paul's bond with his mother does not help him create new life, through reproduction with a partner, but instead flows backwards into his mother, who dies at the end of the novel and with whom Paul can create no future.

Darkness:

Darkness represents hidden or unconscious desire in the novel. When Miriam and Paul have sex for the first time, Paul leads Miriam into a dark place among some fir trees and says that he "wishes the darkness were thicker." This suggests that, although Paul wants to love Miriam, his true intentions and feelings towards her are unclear to him and he is ashamed of his attraction to her or is ashamed of the way he treats her (as he fails to commit to her on several occasions). Similarly, when Paul brings Clara home to meet his family, he walks her to the train in the dark and is suddenly overcome with rage when she tells him she wants to go home.

This suggests that he privately wants to dominate Clara but is not comfortable with this side of himself and will not force her to stay with him. Baxter Dawes hides in the dark when he waits to attack Paul and the fight brings an element of relief to Paul and ends the tension between the two men. The fight, which takes place in the dark, suggests that the men secretly wanted to fight, even though they do not acknowledge this, because fighting allows them to express their emotions and feel release. Finally, at the end of the novel, Paul wishes to die himself after Mrs. Morel's death. Although he is aware of his destructive tendencies, he is not explicitly aware that he wants to kill himself and, instead, walks into the dark, unsure what he plans to do. He ultimately rejects darkness to follow the light back to the town, which suggests that he rejects death and chooses to live instead.