

Week 1 Lecture 1 Sons and Lovers

Though D. H. Lawrence's third published novel, [Sons and Lovers](#) (1913) is largely autobiographical. The novel, which began as "[Paul Morel](#)," was sparked by the death of Lawrence's mother, Lydia. Lawrence reexamined his childhood, his relationship with his mother, and her psychological effect on his sexuality.

The roots of *Sons and Lovers* are clearly located in Lawrence's life. His childhood coal-mining town of Eastwood was changed, with a sardonic twist, to Bestwood. [Walter Morel](#) was modeled on Lawrence's hard-drinking, irresponsible collier father, Arthur. Lydia became [Gertrude Morel](#), the intellectually stifled, unhappy mother who lives through her sons. The death by erysipelas of one of Lawrence's elder brothers, Ernest, and Lydia's grief and eventual obsession with Lawrence, seems hardly changed in the novel. (Both Ernest and his fictional counterpart, William, were engaged to London stenographers named Louisa "Gipsy" Denys.)

Filling out the cast of important characters was Jessie Chambers, a neighbor with whom Lawrence developed an intense friendship, and who would become [Miriam Leiver](#) in the novel. His mother and family disapproved of their relationship, which always seemed on the brink of romance. Nevertheless, Chambers was Lawrence's greatest literary supporter in his early years, and he frequently showed her drafts of what he was working on, including *Sons and Lovers* (she disliked her depiction, and it led to the dissolution of their relationship). Lawrence's future wife, Frieda von Richthofen Weekly, partially inspired the portrait of [Clara Dawes](#), the older, sensual woman with whom Paul has an affair. To be fair, Lawrence met Frieda only in 1912 at Nottingham University College, and he started "Paul Morel" in 1910.

Considered Lawrence's first masterpiece, most critics of the day praised *Sons and Lovers* for its authentic treatment of industrial life and sexuality. There is evidence that Lawrence was aware of Sigmund Freud's early theories on sexuality, and *Sons and Lovers* deeply explores and revises one of Freud's major theories, the Oedipus complex. (Lawrence would go on to write more works on psychoanalysis in the 1920s.) Still, the book received some criticism from those who felt the author had gone too far in his description of Paul's confused sexuality. Compared

to his later works, however, such as [The Rainbow](#), [Women in Love](#), and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Sons and Lovers* seem quite modest.

Sons and Lovers Summary

[Gertrude Morel](#) has an unhappy marriage to coal-miner [Walter Morel](#) in the English town of Bestwood. She is most devoted to her eldest son, William. Her second, sensitive son, Paul, grows up and works in a factory while painting on the side. William dies of a skin disease, and Mrs. Morel plunges into grief. Rededicating her life to Paul revives her, and the two become inseparable.

Paul, now a young man, spends a great deal of time with [Miriam Leiver](#), a chaste, religious girl who lives on a nearby farm. Their Platonic relationship is intense and romantic, but they never approach physical intimacy. Mrs. Morel bitterly dislikes Miriam, feeling she is trying to take her son away from her. Paul grows attracted to [Clara Dawes](#), an older, sensual woman separated from her husband. Finally, Paul and Miriam have sex, but he soon loses interest in her, unwilling to be bound to her in marriage or love.

Paul and Clara have sex and a romance blossoms, but her estranged husband, [Baxter Dawes](#), savagely beats Paul one night. Mrs. Morel develops a tumor and, after a long struggle, dies. Paul arranges the reunion of Clara and Dawes, whom he has befriended since their fight. Paul and Morel move out of the house to separate locations. Paul feels lost, unable to paint any more. Miriam makes a last appeal to him for romance, but he rejects her. He feels suicidal one night, but changes his mind and resolves not to "give into the darkness."

Sons and Lovers Character List

Paul Morel

Paul is the protagonist of the novel, and we follow his life from infancy to his early twenties. He is sensitive, temperamental, artistic (a painter), and unceasingly devoted to his mother. They are inseparable; he confides everything in her, works and paints to please her, and nurses her as she dies. Paul has ultimately unsuccessful romances with Miriam Leiver and Clara Dawes, always alternating between great love and hatred for each of them. His relationship fails with Miriam because she is too sacrificial and virginal to claim him as hers, whereas it fails with Clara because, it seems, she has never given up on her estranged husband. However, the major reason behind Paul's break-ups is the long shadow of his mother; no woman can ever equal her in his eyes, and he can never free himself from her possession.

Gertrude Morel

Mrs. Morel is unhappily married to Walter Morel, and she redirects her attention to her children, her only passion in life. She is first obsessed with William, but his death leaves her empty and redirects her energies toward Paul. She bitterly disapproves of all the women these two sons encounter, masking her jealousy with other excuses. A natural intellectual, she also feels society has limited her opportunities as a woman, another reason she lives through Paul.

Miriam Leiver

Miriam is a virginal, religious girl who lives on a farm near the Morels, and she is Paul's first love. However, their relationship takes ages to move beyond the Platonic and into the romantic. She loves Paul deeply, but he never wants to marry her and "belong" to her, in his words. Rather, he sees her more as a sacrificial, spiritual soul mate and less as a sensual, romantic lover. Mrs. Morel, who feels threatened by Miriam's intellectuality, always reinforces his disdain for Miriam.

Clara Dawes

Clara is an older woman estranged from her husband, Baxter Dawes. Unlike the intellectual Miriam, Clara seems to represent the body. Her sensuality attracts Paul, as does her elusiveness and mysteriousness. However, she loses this elusiveness as their affair continues, and Paul feels she has always "belonged" to her husband.

Walter Morel

Morel, the coal-mining head of the family, was once a humorous, lively man, but over time he has become a cruel, selfish alcoholic. His family, especially Mrs. Morel, despises him, and Paul frequently entertains fantasies of his father's dying.

William Morel

William, Mrs. Morel's "knight," is her favorite son. But when he moves away, she disapproves of his new lifestyle and new girlfriends, especially Lily. His death plunges Mrs. Morel into grief.

Baxter Dawes Dawes, a burly, handsome man, is estranged from his wife, Clara Dawes, because of his infidelity. He resents Paul for taking Clara, but over time the men become friends.

Annie Morel Annie is the Morel's only daughter. She is a schoolteacher who leaves home fairly early.

Arthur Morel Arthur, the youngest Morel son, is exceptionally handsome, but also immature. He rashly enters the military, and it takes a while until he gets out. He marries Beatrice.

Louisa Lily Denys Western Lily, William's girlfriend, is materialistic and vain. Her condescending behavior around the Morels irritates William, and she soon forgets about him after his death.

The Leivers The Leivers own a nearby farm that Paul and Mrs. Morel visit. They have three sons< Edgar being the eldest< and two daughters, including Miriam.

Edgar Leivers The eldest Leiver son, Edgar and Paul become friends.

Agatha Leivers The elder sister of Miriam, Agatha is a school-teacher who fights with Miriam for Paul's attention.

Beatrice A friend of the Morel's who stops by and insults Miriam and flirts with Paul. She eventually marries Arthur.

Mrs. Radford Clara's mother, with whom she lives. Clara is embarrassed by her.

Thomas Jordan A curt, old man, Jordan employs Paul at his warehouse of surgical appliances.

Pappleworth Paul's supervisor at Jordan's.

Fanny A lively hunchback who works at Jordan's.

Polly Worker at Jordan's whom Paul regularly has dinner with.

Connie An attractive, redheaded worker at Jordan's.

Louie Facetious worker at Jordan's.

Emma Old, condescending worker at Jordan's.

Mr. Heaton Clergyman who visits Mrs. Morel and becomes Paul's godfather.

Dr. Ansel Mrs. Morel's doctor.

Jerry Purdy Friend of Morel's.

John Field Childhood friend of Mrs. Morel's.

Sons and Lovers Themes

Oedipus complex

Perhaps Sigmund Freud's most celebrated theory of sexuality, the Oedipus complex takes its name from the title character of the Greek play Oedipus Rex. In the story, Oedipus is prophesied to murder his father and have sex with his mother (and he does, though unwittingly). Freud argued that these repressed desires are present in most young boys. (The female version is called the Electra complex.)

[D.H. Lawrence](#) was aware of Freud's theory, and [Sons and Lovers](#) famously uses the Oedipus complex as its base for exploring Paul's relationship with his mother. Paul is hopelessly devoted to his mother, and that love often borders on romantic desire. Lawrence writes many scenes between the two that go beyond the bounds of conventional mother-son love. Completing the Oedipal equation, Paul murderously hates his father and often fantasizes about his death.

Paul assuages his guilty, incestuous feelings by transferring them elsewhere, and the greatest receivers are Miriam and Clara (note that transference is another Freudian term). However, Paul cannot love either woman nearly as much as he does his mother, though he does not always realize that this is an impediment to his romantic life. The older, independent Clara, especially, is a failed maternal substitute for Paul. In this setup, [Baxter Dawes](#) can be seen as an imposing father figure; his savage beating of Paul, then, can be viewed as Paul's unconsciously desired punishment for his guilt. Paul's eagerness to befriend Dawes once he is ill (which makes him something like the murdered father) further reveals his guilt over the situation.

But Lawrence adds a twist to the Oedipus complex: Mrs. Morel is saddled with it as well. She desires both William and Paul in near-romantic ways, and she despises all their girlfriends. She, too, engages in transference, projecting her dissatisfaction with her marriage onto her smothering love for her sons. At the end of the novel, Paul takes a major step in releasing himself from his Oedipus complex. He intentionally overdoses his dying mother with morphia, an act that reduces her suffering but also subverts his Oedipal fate, since he does not kill his father, but his mother.

Bondage

Lawrence discusses bondage, or servitude, in two major ways: social and romantic. Socially, Mrs. Morel feels bound by her status as a woman and by industrialism. She complains of feeling "buried alive," a logical lament for someone married to a miner, and even the children feel they are in a "tight place of anxiety." Though she joins a women's group, she must remain a housewife for life, and thus is jealous of Miriam, who is able to utilize her intellect in more opportunities. Ironically, Paul feels free in his job at the factory, enjoying the work and the company of the working-class women, though one gets the sense that he would still rather be painting.

Romantic bondage is given far more emphasis in the novel. Paul (and William, to a somewhat lesser extent) feels bound to his mother, and cannot imagine ever abandoning her or even marrying anyone else. He is preoccupied with the notion of lovers "belonging" to each other, and his true desire, revealed at the end, is for a woman to claim him forcefully as her own. He feels the sacrificial Miriam fails in this regard and that Clara always belonged to Baxter Dawes. It is clear that no woman could ever match the intensity and steadfastness of his mother's claim.

Complementing the theme of bondage is the novel's treatment of jealousy. Mrs. Morel is constantly jealous of her sons' lovers, and she masks this jealousy very thinly. Morel, too, is jealous over his wife's closer relationships with his sons and over their successes. Paul frequently rouses jealousy in Miriam with his flirtations with Agatha Leiver and [Beatrice](#), and Dawes is violently jealous of Paul's romance with Clara.

Contradictions and oppositions

Lawrence demonstrates how contradictions emerge so easily in human nature, especially with love and hate. Paul vacillates between hatred and love for all the women in his life, including his mother at times. Often he loves and hates at the same time, especially with Miriam. Mrs. Morel, too, has some reserve of love for her husband even when she hates him, although this love dissipates over time.

Lawrence also uses the opposition of the body and mind to expose the contradictory nature of desire; frequently, characters pair up with someone who is

quite unlike them. Mrs. Morel initially likes the hearty, vigorous Morel because he is so far removed from her dainty, refined, intellectual nature. Paul's attraction to Miriam, his spiritual soul mate, is less intense than his desire for the sensual, physical Clara.

The decay of the body also influences the spiritual relationships. When Mrs. Morel dies, Morel grows more sensitive, though he still refuses to look at her body. Dawes's illness, too, removes his threat to Paul, who befriends his ailing rival.

Nature and flowers

Sons and Lovers has a great deal of description of the natural environment. Often, the weather and environment reflect the characters' emotions through the literary technique of pathetic fallacy. The description is frequently eroticized, both to indicate sexual energy and to slip past the censors in Lawrence's repressive time.

Lawrence's characters also experience moments of transcendence while alone in nature, much as the Romantics did. More frequently, characters bond deeply while in nature. Lawrence uses flowers throughout the novel to symbolize these deep connections. However, flowers are sometimes agents of division, as when Paul is repulsed by Miriam's fawning behavior towards the daffodil.