

## Main female characters in *Sons and Lovers*

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**ABSTRACT:** David Herbert Laurence is a great and controversial English writer of the twentieth Century. Of all his works, *Sons and Lovers* (1913) tells us about the role of men. Yet, this paper purports that this novel is written to women, about women and for women within a male-dominated society. Strengthening three different female characters is what this work aims to foreground. Confined to the domestic sphere, women's role during the Victorian era was attached to productivity, domesticity and purity. This paper makes an attempt to trace the destabilization of gender roles through the portrayal of Mrs. Morel, Miriam and Clara.

**KEYWORDS:** domineering, female, flesh, spirit

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*I had any cause to take a vital interest. Not that I humbled myself by a slavish notion of inferiority... so don't make [man] the object of your fine feelings, your raptures, agonies, and so forth. He is not of your order: keep to your caste, and be too self-respecting to lavish the love of the whole heart, soul, and strength, where such a gift is not wanted and would be despised.*

Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (qtd. in Merizig N.p.)

### I. INTRODUCTION:

*Sons and Lovers* is a novel that captures the social, economic and political changes during the Victorian era. Though England rose to an outstanding position as a great empire thanks to the industrial revolution, the status of women was deteriorating. The subordination of women was the hallmark of the late Victorian society. Women were raped of their basic rights and were denigrated in a society where Man used to dominate the scene. Women are "expected to remain subservient to their father or husbands" (Merizig N.p.).

D.H. Laurence portrays three different female characters that constitute the backbone of *Sons and Lovers*. He acknowledges the redefining role of women in tracing their own identity against the hegemony of a patriarchy-driven society.

#### 1. Mrs. Morel: from Victimization to Dominance:

The first part of the novel focuses on Mrs. Morel who seems dissatisfied with her marital life. She complains about being buried alive with a drinking miner. Crippled by her agonizing relationship with Mr. Morel, she turns to her children in search for comfort. Mrs. Morel married her husband out of love at a Christmas party a long time ago. She is barely able to accept that her high expectations have faded away. The man she loves is but a humble coal miner who is addicted to alcohol. He is a souse that squanders his family's money all over downtown. The bitter reality she faces adds to her turmoil: Mr. Morel is not the noble man she has always dreamt of and her acrimonious life can never equate the life she has been longing for. Actually, she despises her husband for his drinking and wonders if her current life will ever change. She is "trapped in an environment hostile to her impulses and wishes ... trapped in a marriage that fails to be what it should" (Haritatou N.p.). Having a turbulent relationship with her husband because of class antagonism has transformed Mrs. Morel from a subjugated wife into a ruling figure.

Feminine domination is historically justified by the primordial role of the mother in assuming maternal responsibility as a " 'woman government' (Hamid 27). Social scientists and archeologists use this phenomenon

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as "matriarchy". The word "matriarchy" is composed of a Latin word and a Greek one; "mater" means "mother" and "archy" means "to rule" (Hamid 27). Mrs. Morel has drifted away from her husband emotionally and physically. She finds relief in getting closer to her sons: Paul and William. D. H. Laurence believes that Gertrude Morel is:

[A] woman of character and refinement [that] goes into the lower class, and has no satisfaction in her own life. she has had a passion for her husband, so the children are born of passion, and have heaps of vitality. But as her sons grow up but as her sons grow up she selected them as lovers – first the eldest, then the second. These sons are urged into life by their reciprocal love of their mother. ( qtd. in Black 31)

Mrs. Morel's Victorian sophistication and thorough ideals have been shadowed by marrying a drunken miner. This explains her transformed behavior from an underestimated woman into a domineering wife who starts casting her husband away and embracing her male lovers to alleviate the everlasting grief.

This transformation is manifested in the leap from being a victim of a male-oriented society that feeds on patriarchy to the struggle against such a social construct. With the capitalist industrial growth, Victorian society witnessed many changes in the role of women who were brought out of home, to be preys within man's sphere. Also, the traditional ideas that a true woman has to be the perfect lady and Angel of the house have changed. Elizabeth Gaskell argues that "Women were subjects of a patriarchal system" (qtd. in Merizig N.p.). This explains how a woman like Mrs. Morel is left in the backyard, having an inferior role to speak for herself. Her sole duty is to rear children and fit the 'conventional' aura of a domestic wife. This is why one can justify her extreme love for them. She behaves so because of her husband's sadistic behavior.

The unfortunate marriage results in the fact that the couple begins to drift apart. Mr. and Mrs. Morel have never been on good terms with each other. For instance, after a quarrel he locks her out of the house and she finds herself alone in the garden. She has been longing to eradicate self-denial, in a house where she cannot fulfill her aspirations, but in vain. She cannot get out of the shackles of patriarchy. She tells a friend of hers that if she were not a woman, many things could have changed and that she could not have found obstacles in her marital life. She has faced battles to become independent, achieve self fulfillment and overcome oppression. According to Haritatu, "she is the angel in the house, the innocent victim of her husband's uncomprehending coarseness, who needs her son's love and tenderness" (N.p.). Leaning to her sons for support may empower her to exist and defy these stereotypes. Following the same vein, Haritatu admits that Lawrence depicts Gertrude as "the frightening ... mother-Medusa, who feeds on her sons' vitality by forcing them to replace their father in her affections" (N.p.).

The advent of capitalism, mechanization and the industrial revolution has affected the Victorian women, for they become devoid of sentiments. In a world bogged down in machinery, a woman with higher social standing has been stripped of the basic emotional needs. The husband's job reflects her inner void, since a drinking coal miner is barely capable to satisfy her spiritual thrust. A man who represents the modern life in its ugly facet is far from providing his wife with love. In the garden, Mrs. Morel fuses with nature that helps her reach ecstatic moments. She "is a potential prophetess like Ursula in *The Rainbow*" who transcends bitter reality to form a mutual symbiosis with nature (Haritatu N. p.).

Her immense maternal love for her two newly-born babies: Paul and William mirrors the beginning of the flame of her self-esteem. Casting her husband away and turning to the sons has soothed her pain:

In her arms lay the delicate baby. Its deep blue eyes, always looking up at her unblinking, seemed to draw her .... Was there a reproach in the look? She felt morrow melt in her bones, with fear and pain. (*Sons* 37)

The birth of the third son reinforces the reconstruction of her maternal identity. The presence of other male figures in her destroyed life has endowed her with power over female oppression. She no longer underestimates herself or feels subjugated due to the substitution of the male supremacy in her life:

Now, with the birth of this third baby, herself no longer set towards him, helplessly, but was like a tide .... feeling him so much part of her circumstances, she did not mind so much what he did, could leave him alone. (*Sons* 46)

Defying the patriarchal constraints is at the heart of Mrs. Morel's leap toward self-redefinition. As a wife, she embodies the concept of a domineering female figure. She has robbed her husband of his role as a father figure. Being eclipsed from instilling moral values in his sons and conducting the house, Walter Morel is but a looming shadow through the corridors. He is spending most of his time at work in an attempt to avoid any direct contact with an empowered and authoritative woman. A man devoid of intellect is unable to interact with a pure but cultured woman of the upper-class. According to Alastair Niven, he "is presented initially as unreasonably ill-tempered, then as weak-willed, and finally as an empty husk from whom the kernel of life has been removed" (qtd. in Bachatarzi and Kechri 15).

The mother-son relationship is imbued with the power of possession and domination. At first, she turns to her eldest son to manipulate his life. After his loss, she darts towards Paul. She possesses him while having dispossessed his father of his power to prove that she exists within a male-dominated society. She also obsesses over her previous weaknesses and failures by motivating her son to succeed in his professional life. She turns Paul into her favorite poodle that obeys what she dictates with no resistance. Wherever his journey in life takes him, she is there for consolation. Forging her identity as a strong woman is credited by her incessant influence on Paul to pursue his upper studies. For her, his success mirrors her pending success:

But she felt a proud woman. When she met well-dressed ladies going home to the park, she thought to herself: Yes, you look very well – but I wonder if your son has two first prizes in the castle. And she walked on, as proud a little woman as any in Nottingham. And Paul felt he had done something for her, if only a trifle. All his work was hers. (Daurio 176)

Mrs. Morel's dominion is also seen in her ability to control everything Paul does or everyone Paul loves. Her love for Paul has thwarted him from being a mature lover. She does not want him to be part of the 'common people' i.e., the low class and does not accept his love stories, either. Her authority creeps towards Paul's emotional and sexual life. Loving another woman may engender problems for the mother. She identifies with her son to the point that she destroys his love affair with the women that he has known. Her authoritative demeanor is justified by her obsession to control him. In this respect, Maria Margaroni affirms that Mrs. Morel's "attachment to [Paul] cripples [him] emotionally as well as sexually" (272). She feels jealous of Miriam, the new comer who will steal her son from her. Miriam is the monster who will deprive her of her endearing offspring for good: "She wants to absorb him. She wants to draw him out and absorb him till there is nothing left of him, even for himself. He will never be a man on his own feet—she will suck him up." So the mother sat, and battled and brooded bitterly" (*Sons* 194).

## **2. Miriam: The 'Botticelli Angel':**

Miriam is depicted as Paul's first love and muse. She is a teacher that resorts to Paul for more knowledge. She needs him to teach her algebra while he insists on having a sexual intercourse with her. She stretches her arms to embrace spiritual awakening. She is an avid dreamer and has romantic aspirations. Her warmth can be justified by her earnest necessity to take refuge in the realm of nature.

Miriam escapes patriarchal oppression, embodied in her father and brother, to leap into a desirable destiny where love prevails. In the novel, the communion with nature has a healing and reviving power over her soul: "Almost passionately she wanted to be with him when he stood before the flowers. They were going to have a communion together, something that thrilled her, something holy" (qtd. in Haritatu N.p.). Amidst nature, she finds utmost ecstasy. The positive energy she derives from nature incites her to enlighten Paul's spiritual insight. She is akin to a star shining his way. She is the muse that inspires him to reach spiritual revival. She becomes his soul mate, orienting him towards serenity.

The discrepancy between the two lovers stems from Miriam's religious intents. In the novel, she objects to Paul's obsession with sex. When he pays her a visit, he realizes how religiously-oriented she is. In other words, she is filled with ethical conducts. Moved by chastity, Paul sees in Miriam the "Botticelli angel" which is "cut off from ordinary life by her religious intensity" (qtd. in Haritatu). Religious norms have "made the world for her either a nunnery garden, or a Paradise, where sin and knowledge were not, or else an ugly, cruel thing" (qtd. in Haritatu). Paul wants to decode her 'purity' to embark into physical communion with her. She quenches his thirst for artistic progress, yet he is disgusted by her inclination towards chastity. Paul feels repelled by Miriam's love for the natural landscape at the expense of his sexual desire.

### 3. Clara: The Independent Flesh:

Lawrence portrays Clara Dawes as the true embodiment of the twentieth century woman who is torn between sensuality and the appalling facet of industrialization. She is a divorced woman who leaves her husband to have a love affair with Paul. In the novel, she is depicted as an attractive woman with immense beauty: “a rather striking woman, blonde, with a sullen expression, and a defiant carriage” (qtd. in Haritatu N.p.). Unlike Miriam who possesses Paul’s soul, Clara represents the flesh as she possesses his body. She constitutes the second wing that may allow Paul to flap like a free bird in the world of passion. She is reduced to an erotic object that Paul resorts to in order to quench his sexual thirst. However, he starts to express dissatisfaction with her: “He hated her bitterly at that moment because he made her suffer ....she guessed somebody had been influencing him. She felt upon him the hardness, the forgiveness of another influence (*Sons* 222).

Through the prism of socio-economic frames, *Sons and Lovers* contextualizes the positions of middle-class women as dependent figures on their spouses and fathers, but at the same time it urges these ‘inferior’ beings to revolt for the sake of “asserting their control over procreation and gaining economic independence” as “modernity” guarantees women’s shift from reproduction capacities to emancipation (Manicom 22). Clara is regarded as the representative of post Victorian women who rebelled against the traditional image of the ‘pure angel’. Being financially independent, she claims women's rights in society. As a working woman, she reflects the emancipation of women, for she forges her identity the day she starts earning money. She divulges her position when she dissociates herself from the indelible economic dependence on the masculinist hegemony, encapsulated by her husband. By so doing, she carves out a place in society where her professional and personal expansion do prevail.

## II. CONCLUSION:

The woman must find another man and he another woman; if the law does not permit it, then he will destroy himself, perhaps with drinking, and she may turn to a son...and his wife in her despair shall hope for sons, that she may have her lover in her hour.

D.H. Laurence, *Sons and Lovers* (qtd. in Bachatarzi and Kechir 35)

In *Sons and Lovers*, D.H. Laurence portrays three different female characters in relation to the male protagonist Paul. The image that the writer intends to infuse rests on the destabilization of gender stereotypes. Patriarchy is challenged due to female resistance to inferiority, conventional duties and repression. In other words, the main interest is in the hands of women: Mrs. Morel, Miriam and Clara have impact on the decentralization of the male hegemony exemplified by Walter Morel and Paul. The centre-periphery dynamic is justified by the demystification of gender roles. What is believed to be the domineering figure turns to the subordinate one. In other words, the redefinition of Paul’s evolution, at the psychological, emotional and physical levels, is credited by the presence of female lovers in his journey to discover himself away from the maternal bond. Walter Morel is also eclipsed due to his wife’s rediscovery of her raped identity behind the bars of the house.

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