

SONS AND LOVERS

D. H. Lawrence



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Introduction and Notes by Victoria Blake

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From the Pages of Sons and Lovers

Paul would be built like his mother, slightly and rather small. His fair hair went reddish, and then dark brown; his eyes were grey. He was a pale, quiet child, with eyes that seemed to listen, and with a full, drooping underlip. (page 65)

She felt the accuracy with which he caught her, exactly at the right moment, and the exact proportionate strength of his thrust, and she was afraid. Down to her bowels went the hot wave of fear. She was in his hands. Again, firm and inevitable came the thrust at the right moment. She gripped the rope, almost swooning. (page 168)

She saw him, slender and firm, as if the setting sun had given him to her. A deep pain took hold of her and she knew she must love him. And she had discovered him, discovered in him a rare potentiality, discovered his loneliness. (page 184)

He had come back to his mother. Hers was the strongest tie in his life. When he thought round, Miriam shrank away. There was a vague, unreal feel about her. And nobody else mattered. There was one place in the world that stood solid and did not melt into unreality : the place where his mother was. Everybody else could grow shadowy, almost non-existent to him, but she could not. It was as if the pivot and pole of his life, from which he could not escape, was his mother. (page 245)

A good many of the nicest men he knew were like himself, bound in by their own virginity, which they could not break out of. They were so sensitive to their women that they would go without them forever rather than do them a hurt, an injustice. Being the sons of mothers whose husbands had blundered rather brutally through their feminine sanctities, they were themselves too diffident and shy. They could easier deny themselves than incur any reproach from a woman; for a woman was like the mother, and they were full of the sense of their mother. (page 306)

She put her hands over him, on his hair, on his shoulders, to feel if the raindrops fell on him. She loved him dearly. He, as he lay with his face on the dead pine-leaves, felt extraordinarily quiet. He did not mind if the raindrops came on him: he would have lain and got wet through: he felt as if nothing mattered, as if his living were smeared away into the beyond, near and quite lovable. This strange gentle reaching-out to death was new to him. (page 314)

“You love me so much, you want to put me in your pocket. And I should die there smothered.” (page 453)

SONS AND LOVERS

D. H. LAWRENCE

*With an Introduction and Notes
by Victoria Blake*

GEORGE STADE

CONSULTING EDITORIAL DIRECTOR



BARNES & NOBLE CLASSICS

NEW YORK

Sons and Lovers was first published in 1913.

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D. H. Lawrence

David Herbert Lawrence was born on September 11, 1885, in Eastwood, a coal-mining town in Nottinghamshire, England, the fourth child of a couple whose marriage Lawrence later described as “one carnal, bloody fight.” Lawrence’s psychologically intimate relationship with his mother would serve as the grounds for many of his novels. Lawrence studied to be a teacher but became interested in the arts. Jessie Chambers, a school love interest, submitted a number of Lawrence’s early poems to Ford Madox Ford, editor of *The English Review*, and he published them. This first exposure would prove to be fruitful, and Lawrence soon published several novels, including *The White Peacock* (1911) and *The Trespasser* (1912), as well as *Love Poems and Others* (1913).

Lawrence gained fame and notoriety in 1913 with the publication of *Sons and Lovers*, a novel which was criticized by some as being too overtly sexual. *Sons and Lovers* was followed by *The Rainbow*, a story of two sisters growing up in northern England that was banned upon its publication for its alleged obscenity. His novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was pronounced obscene and banned in the United Kingdom and America. Despite the censorship, Lawrence remained unapologetic for creating “art for my sake.” Lawrence’s personal life, including his elopement with Frieda von Richthofen, widow of one of his professors and the mother of three children, fueled the aura of scandal that followed him throughout his career.

Despite censorship and other setbacks, in his exceptionally prolific literary career Lawrence authored more than a dozen novels, three volumes of stories and three volumes of novellas, an immense collection of poetry, and numerous works of nonfiction, which he called his “Pollyanalyties.” He also wrote eight plays, most of which have been forgotten. The Lawrence family traveled widely, but as Lawrence’s health worsened they settled in the south of France, where the author died on March 2, 1930. His ashes lie in a memorial chapel at his ranch in New Mexico.

The World of D. H. Lawrence and Sons and Lovers

- 1885** David Herbert Lawrence is born on September 11 in Eastwood, Nottinghamshire, a working-class mining town in central England. The sickly Lawrence is confined to bed for much of his early childhood and grows close to his mother, who tends to him.
- 1898-1901** Lawrence attends Nottingham High School on a scholarship, then takes a job as a clerk in a surgical appliance factory, but he leaves after suffering an attack of pneumonia. His brother, Ernest, dies in October 1901.
- 1902-** Lawrence takes a part-time teaching job at the British
- 1906** Schools in Eastwood and attends a teacher-training center in Ilkeston.
- 1906** Lawrence enrolls at University College, Nottingham, to get his teacher's certificate; he leaves after two years.
- 1909-1910** The English Review publishes several of Lawrence's poems. His mother, Lydia, dies in December 1910; Lawrence assists her by administering an overdose of morphine.
- 1911** Lawrence's first novel, *The White Peacock*, is published.
- 1912** Lawrence and Frieda von Richthofen, the wife of Lawrence's former Nottingham professor Ernest Weekley and sister of famous aviator Manfred von Richthofen, run away to Germany and Italy.
- 1913** Rejected at first by Heinemann Publishers, the autobiographical *Sons and Lovers* is published. Criticized for his graphic depiction of sexual relations, Lawrence defends himself by stating that "whatever the blood feels, and believes, and says, is always true."
- 1914** World War I breaks out. Lawrence and Frieda marry on July 13. Unable to obtain passports for the duration of the war they are forced to live in various places in England, including Cornwall and Derbyshire, where they share a house with John Middleton Murray and the writer Katherine Mansfield.
- 1915** Upon the publication of *The Rainbow*, Lawrence is prosecuted for his liberal use of profanity and graphic descriptions of sex, and the novel is suppressed. More than 1,000 copies of the book are burned.
- 1916** Lawrence is introduced to Lady Ottoline Morrell, the wife of a liberal member of Parliament, and she becomes one of his most important patrons. Through her, Lawrence forms friendships with Aldous Huxley, E. M. Forster, and Bertrand Russell.
- 1917** Lawrence and Frieda are suspected of being spies for the Germans.

- 1919** The Lawrences journey throughout Europe, stopping in Sicily, Sardinia, and Switzerland. Lawrence publishes *Women in Love*, the sequel to *The Rainbow*, in Italy.
- 1920** He publishes *Women in Love* in New York.
- 1921** *Women in Love* is published in London. *Movements in European History*, Lawrence's first major nonfiction work, is published, as is his *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*.
- 1922** *Aaron's Rod*, a novel that reflects the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche on Lawrence, is published. The Lawrences travel to Ceylon and Australia.
- 1923** They visit Mexico as well as New York and Los Angeles. *Studies in Classic American Literature*—in which Lawrence considers Benjamin Franklin, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and others—is published.
- 1924-1925** Mabel Dodge Luhan, a New York socialite, gives the Lawrences her Kiowa Ranch in Taos, New Mexico, in return for the original manuscript of *Sons and Lovers*. Lawrence's father, Arthur, dies. While visiting Mexico City, Lawrence falls ill with tuberculosis and is forced to return to England.
- 1925-1926** The Lawrences settle near Florence. Frieda begins an affair with Angelino Ravagli, a former Italian infantry officer whom she will marry in 1950. Lawrence visits his hometown of Eastwood for the last time. *The Plumed Serpent*, a political novel about Mexico and its ancient Aztec religion, is published.
- 1928** *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is banned in the United Kingdom and the United States, creating a great demand for the book.
- 1929** Lawrence's Expressionist paintings, for which he gains posthumous renown, are declared obscene and confiscated from an exhibition at London's Warren Gallery.
- 1930** Lawrence succumbs to tuberculosis on March 2 in Vence, France. Frieda moves to Kiowa Ranch, New Mexico, where she builds a small memorial chapel that houses Lawrence's ashes.
- 1960** An unexpurgated version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is published after Penguin Books is acquitted of obscenity charges brought under the Obscene Publications Act. The trial lasts six days; the thirty-five expert witnesses called to testify include E. M. Forster.

Introduction

THE STORY of how and why D. H. Lawrence wrote *Sons and Lovers* is a love story as much as it is a story about literature. The story begins at D. H. Lawrence's birth and ends just before the outbreak of World War One. Although it is a love story, it is not a story about amor, per se, the exclusive romantic love. Rather, it is about love in all its various guises—love for the Mother Country and the mother, love for the work of writing and, above all, love for life itself. D. H. Lawrence was a passionate man who threw himself into life. In his presence, his peers were aware of life lived more highly, of emotions felt more truly and of the rawness of human experience. Lawrence took life in huge gulps, personalizing it and, in the end, changing it to suit his own artistic goals.

"I remember seeing him sitting apart at a table doing matriculation work," writes Jessie Chambers in her book *D. H. Lawrence: A Personal Record* (see "For Further Reading"). "He smiled across at me and I saw again his uniqueness, how totally different he was from any of the other youths.... There was his sensitiveness ... his delicacy of spirit, that, while it contributed vitally to his charm, made him more vulnerable, more susceptible to injury from the crudeness of life" (p. 47).

Sons and Lovers is Lawrence's third novel. He began writing it when he was twenty-five years old, a young, sensitive schoolteacher with periodic bouts of pneumonia and a penchant for problems of the heart. The novel underwent four major revisions and a name change before being published in 1913. As conceived, it was to be a book based on fact: the story of the young man, Paul Morel, growing up in a coal-mining district of the English Midlands. As such, it would be a thinly disguised fictionalization of Lawrence's own life, a portrait of the artist as a young man or, as the critic Harold Bloom suggests, a portrait of the artist as a young prig.

Lawrence was born in 1885 in a lower-middle-class town in Nottinghamshire during a time in English history characterized by repressive social mores, strict morality, and austere, even ascetic religious practices. In other words, the author was born at a time and in a place particularly inclined toward priggishness.

Lawrence chafed under the yoke of Victorian England. His gift of perception, which told him that life was a vast mystery and wonder, also told him that his country was ruining itself with industrialization, its mechanization, and its impulse toward war. As he grew up, he grew intolerant. "Curse you, my countrymen," he wrote to Edward Garnett, his publisher and friend, in a letter dated July 1912, "you have put the halters round your necks, and pull tighter and tighter from day to day. You are strangling yourselves, you blasted fools" (*The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, Vol. 1, edited by James T. Boulton). To borrow Lawrence's own phrase, England suffered under a "Thou Shalt Not" mentality.

Lawrence longed for the implied permission of the "Thou Shalt," two words that promise not only freedom but also free will. The purpose of life, Lawrence wrote, was not simply to live, but to live vitally and at the edge of the great mystery of existence. This will to live—or, perhaps more correctly, the will toward life—was, in a characteristically Lawrencian sense, mixed up with a philosophy of sex. With more emotion than logic, Lawrence felt that "Thou Shalt," when murmured by a partially clothed woman, promised not only sexual union but also spiritual union. His philosophy is not simple as future critics would categorize it, "sex in the head." What Lawrence wanted was not crude, not base, not purely sexual. "It's a pity that sex is such an ugly little word," Lawrence wrote in an essay.

titled "Sex Versus Loveliness." "While ever it lives, the fire of sex, which is the source of beauty and anger, burns in us beyond our understanding.... Sex and beauty are one thing, like flame and fire. If you hate sex, you hate beauty." Lawrence wanted, through sex, to understand beauty and through beauty, mystery. It was this understanding that Lawrence defined as intuition, and it was this intuition that Lawrence felt to be his prime talent as a writer.

And it is a pity that sex was such a dirty little word in Victorian England, though for admirers of Lawrence it would be hard to wish it otherwise. The most subtle, almost sublime, tensions in his writing owe much to the war between his second-natural will to live and his natural desire to obey. *Sons and Lovers* is the work of a confused man, one who could not figure out which impulse to follow. As in life, so in fiction. In *Sons and Lovers*, the two impulses are represented on the one side by Paul Morel's relationship with his mother and on the other side by his relationship with first Miriam, then Clara. In a much-quoted letter written to Edward Garnett dated November 1912, Lawrence defends the idea of the book, succinctly illuminating its themes.

A woman of character and refinement 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 she selects them as lovers—first the eldest, then the second. These sons are *urged* into life by their reciprocal love of their mother—urged on and on. But when they come to manhood, they can't love, because their mother is the strongest power in their lives, and holds them.... As soon as the young men come into contact with women, there's a split. William gives his sex to a fribble, and his mother holds his soul. But the split kills him because he doesn't know where he is. The next son gets a woman who fights for his soul—fights his mother. The son loves the mother—all the sons hate and are jealous of the father. The battle goes on between the mother and the girl, with the son as object. The mother gradually grows stronger, because of the tie of blood. The son decides to leave his soul in his mother's hands and, like his elder brother, go for passion. He gets passion. Then the split begins to tell again. But, almost unconsciously, the mother realizes what is the matter, and begins to die. The son casts off his mistress, attends to his mother dying. He is left in the end naked of everything, with the drift toward death (*Letters*).

Since Freud, mother love versus romantic love has become a familiar theme. Hundreds of pages, perhaps thousands, have been written about Lawrence's Oedipus complex as demonstrated in the novel. Critics began to see the novel in a Freudian light as early as 1913; *Sons and Lovers* was taken to be the first, great, Freudian allegory. "As he stooped to kiss his mother, she threw her arms round his neck, hid her face on his shoulder, and cried, in a whimpering voice, so unlike her own that he writhed in agony," Lawrence wrote. "'And I've never—you know, Paul—I've never had a husband—not really—'" Mrs. Morel says. Paul "stroked his mother's hair, and his mouth was on her throat" (page 234).

Although Lawrence was aware of Freudian ideas as early as 1912, there is no indication that he intended the book to have a Freudian subtext. Responding to the Freudian interpretation, he thought the critics had carved a half lie from an honest portrayal of his childhood. He saw what he had written as a novel, not a case history, and considered the text universal, a representation of "the tragedy of thousands of young men in England" (from the Garnett letter of November 1912). Later, in 1921, he published an anti-Freudian tract titled *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*.

However, Lawrence admitted in various letters that he had loved his mother like a lover. He wrote descriptions of Mrs. Lawrence as if he were writing about a girlfriend: "She is my first, great love"

She was a wonderful, rare woman—you do not know; as strong, and steadfast, and generous as the sun. She could be as swift as a white whiplash, and as kind and gentle as warm rain, and as steadfast as the irreducible earth beneath us,” he wrote to Louise Burrows in December 1910, on the eve of his mother’s death (*Letters*). In the same month he wrote to Rachel Ann and Taylor, “This has been a kind of bond between me and my mother. We have loved each other, almost with a husband and wife love, as well as filial and maternal.” Later in the same letter he wrote, “Nobody can have the soul of me. My mother has had it, and nobody can have it again. Nobody can come into my very self again, and break me like an atmosphere” (*Letters*).

This, then, is the setting for the composition of *Sons and Lovers*. A remarkably gifted young man tragically stifled under both the yoke of his mother’s love and the weight of Victorian moralism conceives of an autobiographical novel that will stick to the facts of his upbringing. Eastwood, the rundown though respectable mining town where Lawrence was born, changes to Bestwood. Lydia Lawrence, his mother, changes to Gertrude Morel. And Lawrence, with little change, renames himself Paul.

Lawrence based the character Miriam on Jessie Chambers, the doe-eyed, spiritual girl with whom he developed a friendship to rival any in fiction. “When we were alone together we were in a world apart where feeling and thought were intense, and we seemed to touch a reality that was beyond the ordinary workaday world,” Chambers writes in her book (Chambers, p. 58). As in the novel, Chambers lived with her family on a farm a few miles away from the town. Lawrence, a year her senior, first came to the farm with his mother. Their relationship progressed in much the same way as Paul and Miriam’s. Lawrence frequently visited the farm, spending all day with the family, playing with the brother, talking with the mother and father. When not at the farm, Lawrence wrote letters; at first he addressed them to the whole Chambers family, then gradually he addressed them only to Jessie. The relationship developed slowly. Before they knew it, their lives were intertwined.

Lawrence left school at sixteen and took a job at a Nottingham company that manufactured medicinal supplies. After a brush with pneumonia and a long convalescence, he quit the job and started to work as a student teacher. He read everything he could get his hands on and, with Chambers at his side, explored the halls of the Eastwood library. The pair would leave the library literally burdened with books, their pockets stuffed with them. Ford Madox Ford once said that Lawrence was the only man he knew who read everything he claimed to have read. Chambers read alongside him. Books became their common ground.

They subjected their reading list to intense scrutiny, discussing the characters during long walks, trying to understand how a novel is constructed. Lawrence was not in the least academic in his approach. He personalized his reading, placing himself within the context of the fiction, trying on various philosophies and approaches as if they were shirts. He began to talk definitely of becoming a writer and, scribbling on scraps of paper wherever he could find them, undertook the task of becoming a poet.

Chambers was, in many ways, Lawrence’s first literary agent. In 1909, after Lawrence became frustrated at some initial rejection slips and declared he would never send off his work again, Chambers submitted three of his poems to *The English Review* with a letter to the editor, Ford Madox Hueffer (later Ford), expressing her admiration for the poems and for the poet. Hueffer was impressed with the poems and offered to publish them. He also wanted to meet the poet, fancying himself a great discoverer of upcoming literary talent, and invited Lawrence to his house in London. It was through

Hueffer that Lawrence met Edward Garnett, a man who would champion his writing in London literary circles and fortify his heart during difficult emotional times. Lawrence wrote in a letter to his friend Ernest Collings dated November 1912 that Hueffer “discovered I was a genius—don’t be alarmed. Hueffer would discover anything if he wanted to—” (*Letters*). But in reality it was Chambers who first recognized Lawrence’s literary talents and who first encouraged him to write what “he was urged to from within” (Chambers, p. 89).

Lawrence tried his hand at writing prose. “The usual plan is to take two couples and develop the relationships,” he said on a walk with Chambers. “Most of George Eliot’s are on that plan. Anyhow, I don’t want a plot, I should be bored with it. I shall try two couples for a start” (Chambers, p. 103). Lawrence wrote *The White Peacock* on that plan, creating two couples and exploring the relationship. He sent Chambers pages of the manuscript as he wrote them and she, in turn, offered her criticisms. So intense was their collaboration that, upon the publication of *The White Peacock* in 1911, Lawrence wrote Chambers, “I its creator, you its nurse.”

The pair mostly avoided the topic of romance and sex, although gradually, as they grew through adolescence and into maturity, the issue asserted itself. Lawrence had girlfriends outside of the relationship, even going so far as to propose to one while on a train, but Chambers always occupied the primary position in his heart. “It’s like this,” Lawrence told Chambers, “some strands of your nature are knitted with some strands of mine, and we cannot be parted” (Chambers, p. 141). Later he told the girl that she was necessary to him, the “anvil on which I have hammered myself out...” (Chambers, p. 152).

Despite, or perhaps because of, the obvious mental, emotional, and spiritual connection between the two, Lawrence’s mother disapproved of Chambers. Her antipathy created an atmosphere so charged (Chambers described it as “strung-up” and “tight”) that the girl grew to dislike visiting the Lawrence home. Though Lawrence and Chambers avoided the topic of romance and sex, the issue asserted itself. Mrs. Lawrence forced the question upon her son, and Lawrence, bringing the moment to its crisis, talked to Chambers. He told her that he could not bring himself to love her as “a man should love his wife” because, as he explained, between mother love and romantic love, the blood tie was the stronger of the two. “I can’t make myself love you, can I?” he cruelly asked Chambers. “I can’t plant a little love-tree in my heart” (Chambers, p. 141). The situation, as Chambers described it, was simply that while loving his mother with an almost romantic passion, he had nothing left to give a lover. “The love tore me from you, the love of my life,” Lawrence remorsefully wrote to Chambers in a letter from March 1911. “It was the slaughter of the fetus in the womb” (*Letters*).

Mrs. Lawrence grew fatally ill with cancer during the fall and winter of 1910 as Lawrence’s first novel went into its final proofing stage. She died before she saw the novel in print. Lost in the world without his mother, Lawrence passed into a period of hopelessness and despair. Her death, he wrote, had taken from him all his spontaneous capacity for joy. “The only antidote is work,” he wrote in a letter to his sister in March 1911. “Heaven’s—how I do but slog. It gets the days over, at any rate” (*Letters*).

Lawrence was not content with his first book. “Publishers take no notice of a first novel. They know that nearly anybody can write one novel, if he can write at all, because it’s about himself. A second novel’s a step further.” *The Trespasser*, his second novel, was published in 1912. “It’s the third that counts, though.... If [a novelist] can get over that ass’s bridge he’s a writer, he can go on” (Chambers, p. 189).

Lawrence conceived of *Sons and Lovers*, originally titled “Paul Morel,” during his mother’s sickness. With her death, he began working at it with a vengeance. He had mixed feelings about it and the progress he was making. “I am afraid it will be a terrible novel,” he wrote to Louise Burrows in March 1911. “But if I can keep it to my idea and feeling, it will be a great one” (*Letters*). In a different letter from the same month, he wrote Helen Corke, “Glory you should see [my novel]. The British public will stone me if ever it catches sight” (*Letters*).

Chambers and Lawrence had little contact during this time. She felt, however, that the writing of the third novel would allow Lawrence to work out his conflicting impulses, his loyalty to his mother on one side and his desire for romantic love on the other. She hoped that, through the expurgating process of writing, he could break the stifling maternal bond. She encouraged Lawrence to finish his book, hoping that, once free, he would finally be able to turn his romantic love to her.

So Lawrence wrote and Chambers waited. But as the pages of the manuscript came to her, she was horribly disappointed. “The shock of *Sons and Lovers* gave the death-blow to our friendship,” Chambers wrote (p. 202). The break came in the treatment of Miriam. Far from allowing Lawrence to see his way out of the painful double bind, the novel, as Chambers interpreted it, handed the laurels of victory to his mother. “He had to present a distorted picture of our association so that the martyr’s halo might sit becomingly on his mother’s brow,” Chambers wrote (p. 203). Chambers, disappointed and horrified, offered Lawrence few criticisms and broke off all but the most necessary contact.

Lawrence, who once wrote that he was incapable of standing in the world without a woman beside him, soon found Frieda Weekley, a woman he described as earthy, elemental, and passionate. She was older than he; she was married to his professor; she had three children. Even so, Lawrence convinced Frieda to run away with him to Germany after only a six-week courtship. Penniless and living in a proverbial sin, the pair later moved to Italy, where, in the spring of 1913, Lawrence finished the final draft of *Sons and Lovers*.

Lawrence wrote Chambers the following brief letter from Italy in March 1913:

I’m sending you the proofs of the novel, I think you ought to see it before it’s published. I hear from Ada that you were in digs again. Send the novel on to her when you’ve done with it.... The last year hasn’t been all roses for me. I’ve had my ups and downs out here with Frieda. But we mean to marry as soon as the divorce is through.... Frieda and I discuss you endlessly. We should like you to come out to us sometime, if you would care to. But we are leaving here in about a week, it’s getting too hot for us, I mean the weather, not the place. I must leave off now, they’re waiting for me (*Letters*).

Chambers, who felt she had been horribly mistreated and deceived both in fiction and in life, didn’t read the proofs of the novel. One reading was enough to last her a lifetime, she said. She sent the letter back to Italy without reply. Lawrence, at first hurt by the snub, didn’t attempt further communication. After more than ten years of love and friendship, this letter was the pair’s last contact.

Lawrence returned to England with Frieda in 1914. Her divorce finally came through and they were married. Though their relationship was often tumultuous, the marriage lasted until 1930 when, suffering from tubercular hemorrhage, Lawrence died at the age of forty-four.

If *Sons and Lovers* did not bring the fortune Lawrence had hoped for, it did put him on the literary map. After 1913 the English reading public, his admirers and his critics alike, knew Lawrence was a writer to be reckoned with. They treated him accordingly. He attracted the esteem of F. R. Leavis, an influential and bombastic literary critic, who said that Lawrence was “the great creative genius of our

age, and one of the greatest figures in English Literature” (*The Achievement of D. H. Lawrence*, edited by Frederick J. Hoffman and Henry T. Moore, p. 95). At the same time, he sparked an emotion nearly as much as he did hatred from T. S. Eliot, who said Lawrence had a “lack of critical faculties which education should have given, and an incapacity for what is ordinarily called thinking,” a sentiment that was echoed by some of the members of the bohemian Bloomsbury Group (*Achievement*, p. 98).

“I think, do you know, I have inside me a sort of answer to the want of today: to the real, deep want of the English people, not just what they fancy they want,” Lawrence wrote in a letter to Ernest Collings in January 1913 (*Letters*). “Gradually, I shall get my hold on them.” In quick succession, Lawrence wrote a collection of short stories, *The Prussian Officer*, and two novels, *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. By the time *Women in Love* was published, in 1921, Lawrence had indeed gotten his hooks into the English public. Unlike so many other Nottinghamshire youths who were destined for the coal-mining pit, Lawrence, it became clear, was destined for the canon.

At the same time in literary history, James Joyce had published his *Dubliners* and was hard at work on *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf was developing her “tunneling” technique through *The Voyage Out*, T. S. Eliot had just conceived of *The Wasteland* and moved to England, Old Man Yeats was developing into his last spiritual phase and had just published *Responsibilities and Other Poems*, E. M. Forster had exhausted his first burst of creativity, Evelyn Waugh was gathering material for his *Brideshead Revisited*, and Ezra Pound, who had published five collections of poems, was busy being influential. Ford Madox Ford undertook the task of discovering Modernism and was collaborating with Joseph Conrad, who had given up the sea in favor of the pen, on his later novels. British Modernism, then, was just getting underway.

The beginning of Modernism is generally marked by the imprisonment and death of Oscar Wilde in 1895 and the publication of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and its end by the death of Virginia Woolf in 1941 and the conclusion of World War II. The movement is categorized by a loosening of the constraints of plot and characterization as well as the development of a more emotive language. It is sometimes said that Lawrence is matched only by Joyce in pulling the novel into the twentieth century, though a case can be made in support of some of their other contemporaries.

Sons and Lovers is not generally considered to be Lawrence’s best book, nor his most refined. It was, however, the most widely read of his novels, and though *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* gave him a certain degree of infamy, *Sons and Lovers* is perhaps the novel for which he is most famous. In addition, it has the distinction of marking the end of his youthful period. It is Lawrence’s birthing book, so to speak. In it, he ended his literary apprenticeship and wrote himself into his mature style. A careful reader can watch the shift as it happens. Like a pregnant woman in a maternity dress, *Sons and Lovers* is, in reality, two books under one jacket, the old and the new together.

The book opens with a description of the Morel family in the tradition of the social realism of Dickens, Hardy, or Fielding. Here is Mrs. Morel, spitting on the iron, going off to church. Here is Mr. Morel, making gunpowder tubes for the mine, humming as he works. Children come tumbling in, tearing collars and destroying dolls. But the characters are more than types: the abused wife, the drunken husband, a flock of browbeaten children. Although the reader decides relatively early on that Morel is a scoundrel and a rogue, Lawrence, with remarkable objectivity, presents the other side of Morel. To balance the cad, we see the man bringing his wife tea in bed and wanting a kiss. Lawrence treats these scenes tenderly, endowing them with emotion while managing to avoid sentimentality.

Part One describes all aspects of lower-class life: the births, the deaths and marriages, the holidays,

and fairs, the courting rituals and wooing practices, the trouble with money, the trouble with health, the fear of injury, the aspirations for social advance. Part One is simple and straightforward; it progresses along at a good clip and follows a realistic timeline. It is simple but not dull, realistic but not storybookish. It is, in short, a triumph of Victorian social realism.

Part One closes with William's death and Paul's illness. As Paul recovers, during the interlude between the two sections, he is reborn as a man, capable if not ready for romantic love, in a free relationship with his mother. Part Two opens. Miriam appears in the doorway at Willey Farm "sixteen and very beautiful." With the characters already firmly in place, Lawrence starts writing the novel that he was born to write.

It could be coincidence, or it could be that Lawrence had discovered his subject, but in any event it is not without note that all of the romantic and sexual scenes in the novel occur in Part Two. These scenes allowed Lawrence to write in a language that was, for him, most natural. This is the language that would later be called Lawrencian, a language elusive and vague, but yet so true. "Miriam turned to him. He answered. They were together.... Her soul expanded into prayer beside him. He felt the strange fascination of shadowy religious places. All his latent mysticism quivered into life. She was drawn to him. He was a prayer along with her" (page 185).

But then, too, there is Lawrence's other language, the language of symbol. "Paul and Miriam walked in silence. Suddenly he started. The whole of his blood seemed to burst into flame, and he could scarcely breathe. An enormous orange moon was staring at them from the rim of the sandhills. He stood still, looking at it" (page 197). This language pervades the book: Paul tossing cherries to Miriam; the memorable scene in which Mrs. Morel holds her unnamed infant up to the setting sun. This language predicts the excursions Lawrence made into the sublime with *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*.

In Lawrence's mind the sexual/romantic language and the symbolic language were not at all separated. Through it, he described what cannot be described, indirectly naming what cannot be named: a sense of the spiritual. Perhaps, too, it is this language that Lawrence felt filled the unspoken need of the British public: the need to live, unfettered and unconstrained, in the face of a great mystery. He had an unflinching sense of the real, in life and in man. He understood that love could be explained more completely and more subtly by pointing out the pollen on a woman's cheek, deposited there as she turned away from her lover, a smudge of yellow on her white skin. But he didn't understand just intellectually. There is a sense, with Lawrence, that he wrote with his entire body, not just his pen, viscerally explaining where lesser authors explain simply with their minds.

Though often these passages are annoyingly indistinct and, for all their spiritual beauty, difficult to get through, the reader remembers the sense of them years later. They stick to you, like pollen on a cheek, a sense of mystery, a sense of the wonderful and the unknown. It is this sense, frustratingly unnamable, that was Lawrence's genius and his legacy to letters.

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TO EDWARD GARNETT

PART ONE

The Early Married Life of the Morels

“THE BOTTOMS” succeeded to “Hell Row.” Hell Row was a block of thatched, bulging cottages that stood by the brookside on Greenhill Lane. There lived the colliers who worked in the little gin-pits in two fields away.¹ The brook ran under the alder trees, scarcely soiled by these small mines, whose coal was drawn to the surface by donkeys that plodded wearily in a circle round a gin. And all over the countryside were these same pits, some of which had been worked in the time of Charles II,^a the feeble colliers and the donkeys burrowing down like ants into the earth, making queer mounds and little black places among the corn-fields and the meadows. And the cottages of these coal-miners, in blocks and pairs here and there, together with odd farms and homes of the stockings,^b straying over the parish, formed the village of Bestwood.²

Then, some sixty years ago, a sudden change took place. The gin-pits were elbowed aside by the large mines of the financiers. The coal and iron field of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire was discovered. Carston, Waite and Co. appeared. Amid tremendous excitement, Lord Palmerston formally opened the company’s first mine at Spinney Park, on the edge of Sherwood Forest.

About this time the notorious Hell Row, which through growing old had acquired an evil reputation, was burned down, and much dirt was cleansed away.

Carston, Waite & Co. found they had struck on a good thing, so, down the valleys of the brooks from Selby and Nuttall, new mines were sunk, until soon there were six pits working. From Nuttall, high up on the sandstone among the woods, the railway ran, past the ruined priory of the Carthusians and past Robin Hood’s Well, down to Spinney Park, then on to Minton, a large mine among corn-fields; from Minton across the farmlands of the valleyside to Bunker’s Hill, branching off there, and running north to Beggarlee and Selby, that looks over at Crich and the hills of Derbyshire: six mines like black studs on the countryside, linked by a loop of fine chain, the railway.

To accommodate the regiments of miners, Carston, Waite and Co. built the Squares, great quadrangles of dwellings on the hillside of Bestwood, and then, in the brook valley, on the site of Hell Row, they erected the Bottoms.

The Bottoms consisted of six blocks of miners’ dwellings, two rows of three, like the dots on a blank-six domino, and twelve houses in a block. This double row of dwellings sat at the foot of the rather sharp slope from Bestwood, and looked out, from the attic windows at least, on the slow climb of the valley towards Selby.

The houses themselves were substantial and very decent. One could walk all round, seeing little front gardens with auriculas and saxifrage in the shadow of the bottom block, sweet-williams and pinks in the sunny top block; seeing neat front windows, little porches, little privet hedges, and dormer windows for the attics. But that was outside; that was the view on to the uninhabited parlours of all the colliers’ wives. The dwelling-room, the kitchen, was at the back of the house, facing inward between the blocks, looking at a scrubby back garden, and then at the ash-pits.^c And between the rows, between the long lines of ash-pits, went the alley, where the children played and the women gossiped and the

men smoked. So, the actual conditions of living in the Bottoms, that was so well built and that looked so nice, were quite unsavoury because people must live in the kitchen, and the kitchens opened on that nasty alley of ash-pits.

Mrs. Morel was not anxious to move into the Bottoms, which was already twelve years old and on the downward path, when she descended to it from Bestwood. But it was the best she could do. Moreover, she had an end house in one of the top blocks, and thus had only one neighbour; on the other side an extra strip of garden. And, having an end house, she enjoyed a kind of aristocracy among the other women of the “between” houses, because her rent was five shillings and sixpence instead of five shillings a week. But this superiority in station was not much consolation to Mrs. Morel.

She was thirty-one years old, and had been married eight years. A rather small woman, of delicate mould but resolute bearing, she shrank a little from the first contact with the Bottoms women. She came down in the July, and in the September expected her third baby.

Her husband was a miner. They had only been in their new home three weeks when the wakes, a fair, began. Morel, she knew, was sure to make a holiday of it. He went off early on the Monday morning, the day of the fair. The two children were highly excited. William, a boy of seven, fled off immediately after breakfast, to prowl round the wakes ground, leaving Annie, who was only five, to whine all morning to go also. Mrs. Morel did her work. She scarcely knew her neighbours yet, and knew no one with whom to trust the little girl. So she promised to take her to the wakes after dinner.

William appeared at half-past twelve. He was a very active lad, fair-haired, freckled, with a touch of the Dane or Norwegian about him.

“Can I have my dinner, mother?” he cried, rushing in with his cap on. “‘Cause it begins at half-past one, the man says so.”

“You can have your dinner as soon as it’s done,” replied the mother.

“Isn’t it done?” he cried, his blue eyes staring at her in indignation. “Then I’m goin be-out it.”^d

“You’ll do nothing of the sort. It will be done in five minutes. It is only half-past twelve.”

“They’ll be beginnin’,” the boy half cried, half shouted.

“You won’t die if they do,” said the mother. “Besides, it’s only half-past twelve, so you’ve a full hour.”

The lad began hastily to lay the table, and directly the three sat down. They were eating batter pudding and jam, when the boy jumped off his chair and stood perfectly still. Some distance away could be heard the first small braying of a merry-go-round, and the tooting of a horn. His face quivered as he looked at his mother.

“I told you!” he said, running to the dresser for his cap.

“Take your pudding in your hand—and it’s only five past one, so you were wrong—you haven’t got your twopence,” cried the mother in a breath.

The boy came back, bitterly disappointed, for his twopence, then went off without a word.

“I want to go, I want to go,” said Annie, beginning to cry.

“Well, and you shall go, whining, wizzening little stick!” said the mother. And later in the afternoon she trudged up the hill under the tall hedge with her child. The hay was gathered from the fields, and the cattle were turned on to the eddish.^e It was warm, peaceful.

Mrs. Morel did not like the wakes. There were two sets of horses, one going by steam, one pulled round by a pony; three organs were grinding, and there came odd cracks of pistol-shots, fearful screeching of the cocoanut man's rattle, shouts of the Aunt Sally man, screeches from the peep-show lady. The mother perceived her son gazing enraptured outside the Lion Wallace booth, at the picture of this famous lion that had killed a negro and maimed for life two white men. She left him alone, and went to get Annie a spin of toffee. Presently the lad stood in front of her, wildly excited.

"You never said you was coming—isn't the' a lot of things?—that lion's killed three men—I've spent my tuppence—an' look here."

He pulled from his pocket two egg-cups, with pink moss-roses on them.

"I got these from that stall where y'ave ter get them marbles in them holes. An' I got these two for two goes—'aepenny a go—they've got moss-roses on, look here. I wanted these."

She knew he wanted them for her.

"H'm!" she said, pleased. "They *are* pretty!"

"Shall you carry 'em, 'cause I'm frightened o' breakin' 'em?"

He was tipful of excitement now she had come, led her about the ground, showed her everything. Then, at the peep-show, she explained the pictures, in a sort of story, to which he listened as spellbound. He would not leave her. All the time he stuck close to her, bristling with a small boy's pride of her. For no other woman looked such a lady as she did, in her little black bonnet and hooded cloak. She smiled when she saw women she knew. When she was tired she said to her son:

"Well, are you coming now, or later?"

"Are you goin' a'ready?" he cried, his face full of reproach.

"Already? It is past four, *I* know."

"What are you goin' a'ready for?" he lamented.

"You needn't come if you don't want," she said.

And she went slowly away with her little girl, whilst her son stood watching her, cut to the heart to let her go, and yet unable to leave the wakes. As she crossed the open ground in front of the Moon and Stars she heard men shouting, and smelled the beer, and hurried a little, thinking her husband was probably in the bar.

At about half-past six her son came home, tired now, rather pale, and somewhat wretched. He was miserable, though he did not know it, because he had let her go alone. Since she had gone, he had not enjoyed his wakes.

"Has my dad been?" he asked.

"No," said the mother.

"He's helping to wait at the Moon and Stars. I seed him through that black tin stuff wi' holes in, o' the window, wi' his sleeves rolled up.

"Ha!" exclaimed the mother shortly. "He's got no money. An' he'll be satisfied if he gets his 'lowance,^f whether they give him more or not."

When the light was fading, and Mrs. Morel could see no more to sew, she rose and went to the door. Everywhere was the sound of excitement, the restlessness of the holiday, that at last infected her. She

went out into the side garden. Women were coming home from the wakes, the children hugging white lamb with green legs, or a wooden horse. Occasionally a man lurched past, almost as full as he could carry.^g Sometimes a good husband came along with his family, peacefully. But usually the women and children were alone. The stay-at-home mothers stood gossiping at the corners of the alleys as the twilight sank, folding their arms under their white aprons.

Mrs. Morel was alone, but she was used to it. Her son and her little girl slept upstairs; so, it seemed her home was there behind her, fixed and stable. But she felt wretched with the coming child. The world seemed a dreary place, where nothing else would happen for her—at least until William grew up. But for herself, nothing but this dreary endurance—till the children grew up. And the children! She could not afford to have this third. She did not want it. The father was serving beer in a public house, swilling himself drunk. She despised him, and was tied to him. This coming child was too much for her. If it were not for William and Annie, she was sick of it, the struggle with poverty and ugliness and meanness.

She went into the front garden, feeling too heavy to take herself out, yet unable to stay indoors. The heat suffocated her. And looking ahead, the prospect of her life made her feel as if she were buried alive.

The front garden was a small square with a privet hedge. There she stood, trying to soothe herself with the scent of flowers and the fading, beautiful evening. Opposite her small gate was the stile that led uphill, under the tall hedge between the burning glow of the cut pastures. The sky overhead throbbed and pulsed with light. The glow sank quickly off the field; the earth and the hedges smoked at dusk. As it grew dark, a ruddy glare came out on the hilltop, and out of the glare the diminished commotion of the fair.

Sometimes, down the trough of darkness formed by the path under the hedges, men came lurching home. One young man lapsed into a run down the steep bit that ended the hill, and went with a crash into the stile. Mrs. Morel shuddered. He picked himself up, swearing viciously, rather pathetically, as if he thought the stile had wanted to hurt him.

She went indoors, wondering if things were never going to alter. She was beginning by now to realise that they would not. She seemed so far away from her girlhood, she wondered if it were the same person walking heavily up the back garden at the Bottoms as had run so lightly up the breakwater at Sheerness ten years before.

“What have *I* to do with it?” she said to herself. “What have I to do with all this? Even the child I am going to have! It doesn’t seem as if *I* were taken into account.”

Sometimes life takes hold of one, carries the body along, accomplishes one’s history, and yet is not real, but leaves oneself as it were slurred over.

“I wait,” Mrs. Morel said to herself—“I wait, and what I wait for can never come.

Then she straightened the kitchen, lit the lamp, mended the fire, looked out the washing for the next day, and put it to soak. After which she sat down to her sewing. Through the long hours her needles flashed regularly through the stuff. Occasionally she sighed, moving to relieve herself. And all the time she was thinking how to make the most of what she had, for the children’s sakes.

At half-past eleven her husband came. His cheeks were very red and very shiny above his black moustache. His head nodded slightly. He was pleased with himself.

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