

Oedipal Complex in *Sons and Lovers*

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Abstract: This article is trying to explore the psychological aspects of the characters by analyzing the text of the novel. Although Lawrence said that he had been unaware about Freudian theory while writing *Sons and Lovers* the actions and reactions of two major young male characters William and Paul Morel especially in their love life, definitely points to the problem of oedipal complex existent in their psyche. The middle class mother, who due to the infatuation of her young age married a working class miner and gradually becoming frustrated in the marital relation, rests her hopes to her children completely neglecting the existence of her husband. This obsessive love of their mother creates a problem in the love life of two elder sons of Morel family. Whenever they fall in love with a girl they find difficulty in pursuing the relation with ease and normalcy. Although they unconsciously perceive an obstacle within they could not identify it. This article is trying to explain the nature and source of the problem and the different responses of William and Paul to this problem.

Keywords: Psyche, split, love, oedipal, fixation, problem, mother, son, relation

As the very title suggests *Sons and Lovers* is a novel about mother love or mother fixation and its relationship to sexual love. The significant aspect of Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* is its psychological adventurousness. Here Lawrence resolutely begins an exploration into the tangled relations between men and women. The broad psychological outlines of the novel show that it presents the Freudian imbroglio in almost classic completeness. Lawrence said that he was not acquainted with Freud's work in the period he had been writing *Sons and Lovers* though he had heard of him.

The book falls into two parts. The first describes the early married years of a coal-miner and his wife and also the youth and adolescence of their children. The miner, Morel is illiterate, no match for his wife in self-consciousness and articulacy. She is a former pupil-teacher with aspiration towards the middle classes. The story is biased heavily in her direction. Nevertheless, the miner is a portrait of some complexity, and over and over again intimations of his former attractiveness and latent kindness come through, almost against the intention of the author. But what for the most part is shown to us is a conflict between husband and wife, terrible in its concentration and expenditure of energy. The relationship between Gertrude and Mr. Morel is full of contrast and conflicts. Hence, their happiness is short lived and the relationship gets strained even before the first child is born. The contrast is due to the difference in their social class and upbringing. Mr. Morel is quite content with the crude mould of the working class family, but Mrs. Morel resents it. The conflict between Mr. Morel and his wife is therefore a conflict between two elements in the way of life of working class. It is of course, very much a conflict of personality. Gertrude is social and rigidly immovable while Walter is more of a social animal, who is quite content in his surroundings. As a result she becomes disillusioned with her marriage to Mr. Morel. She yearns for a change in Mr. Morel, change that seems against the facts of the working class life. She herself is aware that the change she wants is impossible to come as she says to herself. The consequence is disastrous for the family. Mrs. Morel turns completely to her children and through their achievements she wants to fill the void in her life. So as her sons grow up she pins her hope on them. In the process she first alienates Mr. Morel himself in his own family. Children were afraid of their father and simultaneously too attached to their mother. Accordingly, the male children of the family, especially Paul and his older brother William, develop a deep attachment to their mother and an intense dislike of their abusive father:

"All children, but particularly Paul, were peculiarly against their father" (Lawrence, 66).

Freud in his essay "The Most Prevalent form of Degradation in Erotic Life" describes a wide spread phenomenon of psychical impotence of modern, civilized men in which individuals because of an unresolved incestuous attachment for their mothers find it impossible to fuse tender and sensual feelings into a wholesome love for a woman of their age. These men are sexually attracted by women who are in some way inferior to them, while the tenderness they feel for their feminine social equal lacks a natural quality. These lead to a split in them. This Freudian idea offers a convenient way to understand the characters William and Paul Morel of *Sons and Lovers*. The first part of the novel shows the origin of the 'split' which is to affect both William and Paul.

Now this kind of 'split' becomes prominent in the Morel family as we closely examine the short life of the eldest child of the family, William Morel. William from the very early stage of his life was a very bright and intelligent boy. After completing his studies he successfully joined the job of a clerk and later moved to another job in London with a rather high wage in comparison with his family standard. Physically he was also a handsome boy to whom many girls were attracted. Yet as Freud labels oedipal feelings as a common developmental stage in young boys, the eldest son, William is logically the first child to openly, and physically, express his abhorrence for his father in a scene that involves potential violence:

"Morel danced a little nearer, crouching, drawing back his fist to strike. William put his fists ready. A light came into his blue eyes, almost like a laugh. Another word and the men would have begun to fight" (Lawrence, 67).

However when he falls in love with a girl another problem begins. Williams falls for a girl named Gypsy who has only physical attraction. She was hardly educated, shallow and materialistic by nature. In every aspect she was far below in standard to William. He gradually becomes aware about all the facts yet was unable to terminate his relationship. There was also a strong dislike for this girl from Mrs.

Morel's end. He realized that he had not been very happy in this relationship and there had been a problem in their relationship, though he was unable to identify the reason behind it. There was growing tension as his mother had also been continuously disapproving this relation. Eventually he fell sick for a period and dies. So the ideal example of oedipal complex and the 'split' mentioned by Freud can be observed through the brief life and death of William. After his death bereaved Mrs. Morel becomes indifferent to her other family members for a short span of time.

The second part of the novel begins as the second child, adored son of her mother and the hero of the novel Paul Morel, has fallen severely ill after a brief period of William's death. Mrs. Morel now turns towards Paul. It becomes clear that she wishes to live her life through him. Paul is repelled by the rough edged masculinity of his father. His life becomes dominated by his mother. As he grows up he discovers that his mother's protectiveness has cost him the power and freedom to relate to others. In the second part of the novel Paul is involved with two women – Miriam and Clara. Miriam is resented by Mrs. Morel because she is a competition for her son's love on the same ground as herself. Both exercise a motherly possessiveness over Paul. In her passive dominance Miriam unconsciously assumes for Paul the figure of his mother. At the end of the 'Defeat of Miriam' chapter, Paul recognizes that he cannot love her physically, although he does not know why. He fails to recognize the power of the mother- image. The relationship between Paul and Mrs. Morel or the mother and son relationship serves as a nucleus of this novel around which the whole plot revolves. The attachment of Paul to his Mother is extraordinary and this oedipal tie with his mother is responsible for stunting Paul's vital growth. He rejects other women because he compares them with his mother. He has an affair with Miriam, who awakens the artist in him, but on account of the mother-pull which is strongly operative in Paul the two fail to achieve harmony.

At this time another woman Clara Daws, arouses his physical passion. Clara represents all that Miriam does not. She is emancipated, experienced and physically uninhibited. She is also separated from her husband. For a while they are passionately in love, but the consummation of their love brings only momentary satisfaction. Most importantly his mother is not displeased with his sexual relationship with Clara. It is not the women whom their sons sleep with that the possessive mothers hate; it is the women they love. But Clara's husband Baxter intervenes and beats Paul up. Paul is severely hurt and as a result becomes sick. While his mother nurses him both Miriam and Clara are rejected. Paul now safely returns to his mother's castle:

"He had come back to his mother. Hers was the strongest tie in his life. There was one place in the world he 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" (Lawrence, 245).

But it is too late because immediately afterwards his mother's illness reveals itself as a fatal cancer. Paul is so broken by his mother's illness that he becomes totally indifferent to Clara and she begins to tire of him. The relationship soon breaks down. While visiting his mother in the hospital he meets Baxter and a kind of friendship develops between them. Paul is convinced that his relationship with Clara is finished and in a final act of self negation, he brings about the reunion of Clara and Baxter. This becomes the first sign of health in him. Paul has never emerged as a separate human being. He is in a kind of dilemma. The mercy killing of his mother is probably his compulsiveness. The purpose is quite plain. Paul must kill his mother to disentangle himself from her influence, before it is too late. That is the radical dependence on his will upon her, which he realizes is irrevocably fired by her death. He can now deny that his love for her was self-destructive. Paul finds his emancipation from the Oedipus complex in the magnificently titled chapter 'Release'. He finds liberation first by ending the genesis of the complex, his mother, though this comes about in an acceptably compassionate manner. The next step is to find release from Clara which comes about when son-lover Paul acts as a mediator between Clara and Baxter, thereby arranging for his proxy parents to be reconciled. The final act of release comes as he moves away from Miriam at the final chapter, leaving the only other relationship (vexed oedipal problem) behind.

The Freudian oedipal complex which is a part of every individual's development of an adult identity is no doubt the basic concern of the novelist. As Ernest Jones finds there is a great similarity of Paul's oedipal complex to Hamlet's. Lawrence perhaps consciously chose the name 'Gertrude' as of Paul's mother. Hamlet also had oedipal complex and we find an echo of Hamlet's comment, "Go not to my uncle's bed" (*Ham.* 3.4.161) in Paul's voice as he says to his mother "Sleep with Anne, mother not with him" (Lawrence, 111) expressing his mother – fixation and hatred towards his father. However it must also be pointed out that the novel does not totally illustrate the Freudian theme of oedipal complex in relation with the character of Paul; if that would have been the case, then we cannot explain the fact that Paul becomes a friend of the father surrogate Baxter Dawes. Similarly if we regard Clara as representing physical love and Miriam as cerebral love we cannot fully justify the befogging of this theme through Paul's physical intimacy with Miriam.

Finally if the novel ended with the death of the mother and the defeat of Paul like William, the Freudian reading would work generally if not in all details. But in last few lines Paul is regenerated and far from drifting towards death. He is liberated and redeemed: "But no, he would not give in. Turning sharply, he walked towards the city's gold phosphorescence... He would not take that direction, to the darkness to follow her. He walked towards the faintly humming, glowing town quickly" (Lawrence, 267). The word 'quickly' suggests life. Besides, 'gold' is also associated with candle flame, with the sun and with pollen. These elements are combined by bees and the town is humming like a bee hive glowing with lamp lights. Thus Paul can move on to life. Although the novel may have Freudian ideas Lawrence's treatment of the ideas is not pound by abstract thesis. Indeed the novel is primarily concerned with the human existences of life.

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