

The father in sons and lovers



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ I would write a different Sons and Lovers now; my mother was wrong, and I thought she was absolutely right.” (Jeffers 296) This line betrays D. H. Lawrence’s eventual realization about his maternal fixation. As a corollary, it might be implied that he regretted villainizing his father. However, critics have maintained that Lawrence was too severe upon himself—perhaps he was unable to grasp the import of the novel upon a reader who didn’t share his personal associations, or that his genius had unconsciously rendered an objectivity into his work which he failed to recognize himself. As Aruna Sitiesh confirms, “ Sympathy for Walter is scattered all through the novel.” (494) In *Walter Morel*, one finds the predicament of a simple-minded man stuck in an incompatible marriage with a woman who possessed a greater sensibility than he did. “ What he felt just at the minute, that was all to him. . . . His nature was purely sensuous, and she strove to make him moral, religious. She tried to force him to face things. He could not endure it—it drove him out of his mind.” Clearly, a situation mirrored in the later Paul-Miriam relationship; but returning from the digression, Gertrude “ was too much his opposite. She could not be content with the little he might be, she would have him the much that he ought to be. So, in seeking to make him nobler than he could be, she destroyed him.” (Lawrence 18, 20) This distance continued to grow along with the children as the mother diverted her aspirations towards them (her elder sons in particular), resulting in a marriage where the transitory passion of youth had long evaporated, the one which had impulsively brought the mismatched couple together. As Thomas L. Jeffers explains: “ It is an attraction of opposites – the pale civilized lady startled yet warmed by the ruddy native collier – marked in the too-brief but unforgettably vivid scene at the Christmas dance. Though passionately

happy with him during the first months of their marriage, she soon decides that, since he has been less than honest about his fiscal status and has proved fonder of the pub than of her company at home, he is no good, and her marriage has been a mistake.” (299) Nonetheless, it is clear throughout the text that Walter continued to love Gertrude. He couldn't bear to see his position usurped by his sons, and yet he was helpless against his overbearing wife. As a result, he consoles himself in the company of his fellow colliers, “relieving the tedium of their lives with alcohol.” (Murfin 472) In relation to this, there is an interesting observation that the “masculine place is also distinctly feminine . . . it is the orifice of the earth that everyday the colliers “die” into and are “born” out of. This crinkled “womb” – swarming with men, horses, and mice – has enabled Morel to incorporate the feminine side of his self”. One finds an echo of this cathartic sentiment in Lawrence's Nottingham and the Mining Countryside, where he claims that the miners “knew each other practically naked, and with curious close intimacy, and the darkness and the underground remoteness of the pit “stall,” and the continual presence of danger, made the physical, instinctive, and intuitional contact between men very highly developed, a contact almost as close as touch.” (Jeffers 295, 296) At home, the alienated husband tried to assert himself in vain, leading to brutish moments which further contributed to his estrangement. What heightens the tragedy is the fact that he lacked the sensitivity and awareness to comprehend the problem. For instance, when he flung the drawer at Gertrude, he was overcome with guilt and shame even if he didn't express it, and the following lines depict his inner turmoil and attempts at self-justification: “‘It was her own fault,’ he said to himself. Nothing, however, could prevent his inner consciousness inflicting

on him the punishment which ate into his spirit like rust, and which he could only alleviate by drinking.” (Lawrence 49) Thus followed his inevitable descent into alcoholism, which of course further marginalized his position. On the other hand, the shrewd self-righteous wife was fully aware of the situation, and simply gave up on her husband. “ There was this deadlock of passion between them, and she was stronger.” She knew that his statements such as “ I’ll make you tremble at the sound of my footstep.” (Lawrence 49, 43) were nothing but empty threats. She was aware of his tenderness and instinctive nature, and thus, in a manner of speaking, she had an absolute emasculating hold over him—something against which he tried to rebel but never succeeded. Therefore, as a foil to Walter, Gertrude projected herself as the victim, and in fact she was actually convinced about it. However, to the reader it is evident that the individuals must bear the blame mutually. Of course, the real guilt might be traced to the 19th century English ethos, which led to “ pointedly historical circumstances of maternal domination in Victorian and Edwardian households” along with moral restraints and notions of social decorum, which forced unhappy couples to abide in their marriage in spite of daily heartbreaks. Moreover, as a material aspect, “ the stultifying routine in factory, mine, or shop and the dominance of the mother in the verbal nurturance of the children had between them left the father with little to offer in conversation or storytelling” (Jeffers 293, 293), rendering him a nominal head of the family with no actual involvement. For the wife and children would unconsciously view him solely as the provider, and thus endure him as if out of compulsion. Eventually, everyone involved reconciled themselves to the situation. In the case of the Morels, Walter “ did not care any longer what the family thought or felt. . . . The family withdrew, shrank

away and became hushed as he entered. But he cared no longer about his alienation.” (Lawrence 49-50) As for Gertrude, “ she was more tolerant because she loved him less. . . . standing more aloof from him, not feeling him so much part of herself, but merely part of her circumstances she did not mind so much what he did, could leave him alone. . . . autumn in a man’s life. His wife was casting him off, half regretfully, but relentlessly; casting him off and turning now for love and life to the children. Henceforward he was more or less a husk. And he half acquiesced, as so many men do, yielding their place to their children.” (Lawrence 54) Therefore, while the family took each other for granted, Walter’s amiable nature comes to the fore in his interactions with the outsiders, as with his friends, or Gyp or Clara. For the rift at home was too great to be repaired, as reflected by Walter’s dilemma when Paul fell sick: “ The father waited undecidedly on the hearthrug for a moment or two. He felt his son did not want him.” (Lawrence 82) One finds an inherent conflict in the father—a dichotomy of feeling, a paternal love which Walter was unable to express or realize, owing to various inhibitions including notions of manhood—in effect, creating a miserable situation. As a reactionary measure, Walter resorted to annoying trifles, perhaps just so the family might take notice of him. He gave up all pretence and manners, and of course he had lost the charm of his youth; “ he persisting in his dirty and disgusting ways, just to assert his independence. They loathed him.” (Lawrence 129) Yet by the end of the novel, Walter becomes a timid old man inured to his desolation. He is seen to be afraid of his wife and kids, silently acquiescing to their directions—a most tragic figure, a faint shadow of his past self—a personality succinctly captured by Jeffers in the following passage: “ the unlettered butty who went down pit

when he was eight years old, rarely sees daylight, labors under conditions physically draining and dangerous, drinks with his mates, and feels generally unwanted by his wife and children. He is also the “ natural man” who, in wonderfully evoked scenes, has been famous for his lithe dancing and choir-boy singing . . . who comfortably cooks his own breakfast each morning; who walks to work through the fields and along the hedgerows, off which he may pick a stalk to chew on for the day; and who, having recruited his children to help him make fuses, tells them cunning tales about the mice and the horses in the mine.” (294)* * *Works ConsultedGoode, John. “ Individual and Society in Sons and Lovers.” 1970. Sons and Lovers. Ed. Ashok Celly. Delhi: Worldview-Book Land, 2010. 463-69. Print. Jeffers, Thomas L. ““ We children were the in-betweens’: Character (De)Formation in Sons and Lovers.” Texas Studies in Literature and Language 42. 3 (2000): 290-313. JSTOR. Web. 8 Oct. 2011. Lawrence, D. H. Sons and Lovers. Ed. Ashok Celly. Delhi: Worldview-Book Land, 2010. Print. All quotations are taken from this edition. —. Nottingham and the Mining Countryside. 1930. Sons and Lovers. Ed. Ashok Celly. Delhi: Worldview-Book Land, 2010. 440-47. Print. Murfin, Ross C. “ The Waste Land according to D. H. Lawrence: Social Forms of Conflict and Self-Conflict.” 1987. Sons and Lovers. Ed. Ashok Celly. Delhi: Worldview-Book Land, 2010. 470-86. Print. Sitiesh, Aruna. “ Women in Sons and Lovers.” Sons and Lovers. Ed. Ashok Celly. Delhi: Worldview-Book Land, 2010. 487-97. Print.