The illusion of women’s power in d.h. lawrence’s sons and lovers

During the early twentieth century, the idea of women having as much power as men was foreign: men were not only better educated, but were also the primary breadwinners for the family. Though individuals do not have the ability to immediately alter how their society is structured, attempts can be made to rectify inequalities. Women in D. H. Lawrence’s novel Sons and Lovers try to create their own power by adopting certain views about themselves in relation to men. By creating certain mindsets, the characters of Gertrude Morel, Clara Dawes, and Miriam Leivers mentally elevate themselves to positions of power. These mindsets include adopting attitudes of indifference, ownership, and self-sacrifice towards the men with whom they have relationships. However, the problems they try to overcome do not disappear, but are further entrenched.

A certain mindset may be key to success for some, but for the women in Lawrence’s novel, changing perception does not entail transforming reality. The thoughts of Gertrude Morel and her husband Walter Morel function on two different levels: while Gertrude possesses faculties that allow her to appreciate higher forms of thinking like philosophy and religion, Walter is simple-minded, more concerned with physical pleasures like eating and drinking. Such a contrast between their types of thinking results in conflict. Walter has a nature that “ 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” (Lawrence 13). Mr. Morel’s inability to accept his wife’s moral instruction manifests itself when he squanders his income on drinks rather than sufficiently providing for the needs of his family. Though his unhealthy habit may also be a result of poor self-control, a stronger sense

of morality could have better reined in his impulse to drink. Walter’s bouts of drinking often transform him into a violent man, as on more than one occasion he physically abuses his wife while drunk. Gertrude is unable to physically change the situation: she is cannot overpower him by suppressing attacks, and she cannot leave the house, for she needs Walter’s income to raise her children. However, what Gertrude is able to change after repeated incidents of abuse is her attitude towards her husband. The concern over his morals vanishes. Previously, “ she had fretted after him, as if he had gone astray from her. Now she ceased to fret for his love: he was an outsider to her. This made life much more bearable” (14).

By viewing Walter as a stranger, Gertrude puts up a shield of indifference against her husband so that his actions no longer put her into despair. Her husband becomes nothing more than a human cash dispenser that she must continue to live with to feed her children. Gertrude’s counterattacks to Walter’s punches may fail to faze him, but the indifference she expresses perturbs Walter, whose “ soul would reach out in its blind way to her and find her gone. He felt a sort of emptiness, almost like a vacuum in his soul” (42). Gertrude is able to inflict this kind of harm upon her husband because no longer does she view him as a person worthy of her concern. The problem with indifference is that it roots Gertrude to her miserable present. She can make Walter feel as uncomfortable as she wants with all these mind games, but indifference towards her husband also means indifference towards changing her life situation. No amount of mental power allows Gertrude to escape the reality of her dependency on Walter.

Similar themes are raised by a second vexed couple. Though Clara Dawes and her husband Baxter Dawes have been separated for a period of time, they have not gone through a formal divorce. A major reason why Clara does not want a divorce is that such a formal end to the marriage will deprive her of a form of power she believes she possesses. This form of power is ownership of Baxter, as she admits to Paul Morel: “ I think he belongs to me” (315). She is like a child who will not bury her dead cat because the burial would also inter her status as Owner. The reason Clara does not let go of her husband is not due to an ever-enduring affection for him; in fact, she “ did not love Dawes, never had loved him; but she believed he loved her, at least depended on her” (316-317). However, Clara’s penchant for feeling depended upon ultimately causes her to become dependent upon Baxter, the man who gives her this illusion of power. The time she spends with Paul reveals to Clara that he does not express the same need that Baxter does for her to care for him. Combined with the fact that Clara is still carrying around her dead cat of a marriage, this fact causes Paul and Clara to eventually stop seeing each other. Immediately after the break-up with Paul, Clara begs Baxter to get back together with her in what seems like a state of delirium: “‘ Take me back!’ she whispered, ecstatic. ‘ Take me back, take me back!’ And she put her fingers through his fine, thin dark hair, as if she were only semi-conscious” (359). She comes crawling back to Baxter, a woman metaphorically starved during her relationship with Paul, deprived of her sustenance of ownership. Instead of being elevated to a position of power above her husband by being the Owner who provides care, Clara becomes the supplicant who needs to beg Baxter to give her power back. Clara may

think she owns Baxter, but it is Baxter who gives her the ability to have this kind of confidence

Here, a third relationship becomes instructive. Ever since Miriam first met Paul, she has admired his various talents, which include being able to speak French, comprehend algebra, and paint with dexterity. Even though her education has not been luxurious enough to bestow upon her similar abilities, she thinks of herself so highly that she believes only Paul is worthy of her love, and that only she is worthy of Paul’s love, for she is a “ princess” who is “ different from other folk, and must not be scooped up among the common fry” (126). As her relationship with Paul progresses, Miriam continues to cling onto her sense of superiority and begins to exert it over Paul himself. When Paul sleeps with her, Miriam thinks “ there was something divine in it; then she would submit, religiously, to the sacrifice” (249). Miriam revels in the thought that only she has the authority to yield to Paul what he wants: she fails to understand that his desire for her as a person is mixed with a desire for sex. Miriam’s expectations for Paul to appreciate her sacrifice do not sit well with him: the pressure to admire her all the time makes him feel stifled. It is not long before he starts avoiding Miriam. The fact that Miriam thinks highly of herself is what leads to her conclusion that she and Paul are suited solely for each other, but it is this overly controlling mindset that drives Paul away. No matter how much Miriam may try to convince herself that Paul will come crawling back to her, she has no power to guarantee such a reality.

D. H. Lawrence’s novel Sons and Lovers reinforces the idea that, during the early twentieth century, women are perceived as powerless. Gertrude

remains financially bound to her husband, Clara remains dependent on Baxter Dawes, and Miriam loses the man she tries to make love her. Women may gain illusions of control, but these illusions eventually re-emphasize the problems that women try to solve in the first place.