

The sacrifice of arabella: symbolism and self-actualization in d.h. lawrence



In D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, the nature of Paul is epitomized in one particular scene in which he sacrifices Annie's doll after accidentally breaking it. Lawrence reveals a central idea here about Paul that not only parallels the character of Walter, but also foreshadows Paul's eventual treatment of Myriam as well as his mother. Ultimately, Paul's inability to accept things that are broken, particularly those that he breaks himself, exposes the reason that he is unable to contribute to society as a functional and healthy human being.

After breaking the doll Arabella, it seems as though Paul is upset for hurting his sister, who cries upon realizing what Paul has accidentally done. Yet, after a short time, she moves on the way young children normally do. What's odd is that Paul is still upset—for him, the doll remains a reminder of the distress he caused his sister. Paul's inability to get over his breaking of the doll can be seen when Lawrence writes, "So long as Annie wept for the doll he sat helpless with misery. Her grief wore itself out. She forgave her brother—he was so much upset" (66). Rather than let it go, Paul does not find peace of mind until he physically destroys the doll by sacrificially burning it.

Ironically, however, what he dubs a sacrifice is actually done as a means of easing his own tormented mind. The scene itself is paralleled to an earlier one in which Paul's father, Walter Morel, throws a drawer at Gertrude out of anger. Just as Paul despises the doll after breaking it, Morel comes to despise his wife for having hurt her, a fact that can be seen when it is said, "He dreaded his wife. Having hurt her, he hated her" (48). The difference is that while Paul mends his own suffering through the destruction of the things that

cause that suffering, Morel destroys himself through drink and mends other things to ease his suffering.

In Lawrence's description of Walter, we learn that his constant bad mood and his need to get drunk disappear whenever he has work to do at home. " He always sang when he mended boots because of the jolly sound of hammering. And he was rather happy when he sat putting great patches on his moleskin trousers" (72). This contrast between father and son represents a major reason as to why Walter remains static and unchanging throughout the novel while Paul eventually grows. While Walter's guilt consumes him like a cancer, Paul finds relief through the destruction of the things that remind him of that guilt, namely his mother. Aside from its parallelism to the scene with Walter, Paul's sacrifice of Arabella can also be paralleled to his treatment of Myriam, his lover and spiritual confident. After realizing that his sexual desires and his inability to give himself to her completely cause her suffering, Paul rejects her. This can be seen after they have sex for the first time and he realizes how much Myriam is hurt by his need for physical intimacy, described, " Now he realized...that her soul had stood apart, in a sort of horror... very dreary at heart, very sad, and very tender, his fingers wandered over her face pitifully" (314). He literally breaks a part of her when they have sex and afterwards, he sees the pain and sacrifice that she has endured because of him. Soon after, he ends his relationship with her just as he could not help but burn the broken doll after causing pain to his sister.

Paul's obsession with brokenness is also seen in the anguish he feels watching his mother grow older and weaker. While observing his mother,

Paul is described, " With all his young will he could not alter it. He saw her
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face, the skin still fresh and pink and downy, but crow's-feet near her eyes... and there was on her the same eternal look, as if she knew fate at last. He beat against it with all the strength of his soul" (264). Moreover, he sees that his relationships with Clara and Myriam make her sad and he believes that this contributes to her growing illness—a fact that fills him with immense grief. Yet, unlike with the doll or with Myriam, Paul loves his mother above all else, which is why it so hard for him to let go of her the way he lets go of them. As a result, he forces himself to watch her suffer for months while she refuses to die and it slowly consumes him—he has no life outside of his mother and is virtually a shell of a man. Eventually, however, he builds up the courage to kill her by slipping morphine in her milk. It is this final act of destroying the brokenness in his life that catalyzes his growth as a man.

In the end, Paul moves towards the light of the city instead of following his mother into death. This marks the difference between he and his father, who never finds a way out of the darkness of his guilt. Discarding the broken things in his life is an innate characteristic of Paul's being, one that has been present ever since he was a child. By removing himself of all of this brokenness—with the doll, with Myriam, and with his mother—Paul moves on with his life. In *Sons and Lovers* by D. H. Lawrence, Paul's instinctual desire to be whole triumphs over his love for his mother, and ultimately leads to his renewed sense of life.