

# Narrative voice in sons and lovers



Sons and Lovers renders a fractured narrative capturing the dynamic nature of the 'interior of the text' through a rigorous analysis of its characters (and their actions); this is achieved by the narration's rhythmic pattern of theses and antitheses being constantly posited against each other. The text makes a decisive shift from the traditional omniscient narration to a more ambivalent narrative where the idea of 'singular truth' (and narrative) is demolished and subsequently rebuilt. The disintegration of the singular narrative enables the reader to acknowledge the dynamic nature of points of views (POVs) being represented while looking at the complexities involved in what the text 'tells' and 'shows'. The reader is asked to 'trust the tale and not the teller'[1], but even this is complicated by the 'doing' and 'undoing' that the narrative continuously engages in. This essay seeks to look at the shift from omniscient narration to a more fragmented narrative with reference to the chapter 'Lad-and-Girl Love'; it will also focus on Miriam's characterisation as the key to examining the contradictions within the narrative with specific references to the chapter. Moreover, the essay will try to rein in the different theoretical approaches to the text to further explore the significance of the ambivalent narrative deployed.

The text possesses features of both Realist and Modernist fiction which contribute to the ambivalence of the narrative; the conflicts that arise within seem to be an attempt to weave in multiple strands into the narrative while allowing intensive internal engagement. However, there is no sense of closure arising out of such conflicts and the 'doing'/'undoing' in the text ends up giving it the texture of refined interiority. If so, any investigation into the narrative technique has to begin with the conflicts that occur within the

text, be it social, gendered, ideological or primarily, narratorial. The conflicts based on social and ideological grounds are quite evident throughout the text, beginning with the conflicts between Mr and Mrs Morel in Chapters 1 & 2 or even between William and Mrs Morel later in the text. However, I'm more concerned with the narratorial conflicts that occur in Chapter 7 and the changes they effect upon the remaining narrative. To do so though, it is necessary to begin with Part I and observe the shifts that happen in Part II.

Part I of the novel has had its fair share of ideological conflicts; the narratorial voice has been quite consistent and even been omniscient to a certain extent.[2] The narrative strategy has been in sync with what Realist fiction usually follows – that of narrativizing reality. The first part narrativizes the life of the Morels with focus split on Paul, William, and Mrs Morel in a triangular relationship. Here, the narrative is often biased towards Mr Morel, to even castigating him for his class belonging (and resulting characteristics) and taking Mrs Morel's side in most arguments. Mr Morel is relegated to the fringes of the text as Mrs Morel with her 'men' is brought to the epicentre; at times, there's no effort made to maintain a neutral narrative. On the same strain though, there are moments which act as 'compensatory' in reaction to the biased narrative. One such incident is the scene when William is dead and Paul is there at the mine to fetch his father.

“ Paul saw everything, except his father leaning against the truck as if he were tired.”

This statement on part of the narrator distances him from Paul and Mrs Morel while sympathising with Mr Morel's condition. Here, the intentionality of the

narrative seems to be to balance out the unfairness meted out to Mr Morel earlier; it becomes some sort of a juggling act.

In Chapter 7 (Part II), the narrative strategy changes; the omniscient narrator is no more present. Earlier in the text, at certain moments, the narrator's voice had been Paul's point of view being overtly influenced by his mother's opinions. Certain sections were biased but there were some compensatory moments as well to balance out the former. However, in Chapter 7 and even later, the narrative voice is entirely taken over by Paul. This is evident by the first description of Miriam in the chapter; it is far from being objective since it seems to carry within it 'an intense analytical strain' which is determined to direct the reader in a certain direction.[3] There's no space left for any deduction or to follow an alternative line of thought. The reader is supposed to follow Paul in his evaluation of Miriam (which is by using adjectives such as mystical, sensitive, possessive, and as 'romantic in her soul').

However, it would be detrimental to accept Paul's (and the narrator's) evaluation of Miriam as the final word of the text, for what it 'tells' and 'shows' the reader is entirely different. The narrative is dialogical in nature and is imbued with the multiplicity of perspectives and voices. To analyse the text, it is necessary to recognise the 'other voices' existing in there which challenge the dominant mode of narration (that of Paul's voice). At this juncture, I seek to analyse Miriam's portrayal in Chapter 7 as an example of reading against the dominant narrative from within.

Many readers choose to accept the narrator's rendering of Miriam as the legitimate portrayal of her character. If one were to take up this

characterisation to work with initially, it is interesting to note the differences in the narratorial handling of Miriam in Part I and Part II. Part I had briefly introduced Miriam just as other characters had been and with an incident that marked her entry.

“ She was about fourteen years old, had a rosy dark face, a bunch of short black curls, very fine and free, and dark eyes; shy, questioning, a little resentful of the strangers, she disappeared.”

Her entry into the narrative is unannounced and perhaps even unnoticeable, except for the incident with the hen.

“ Now, Miriam,” said Maurice, “ you come an ‘ ave a go.”

“ No,” she cried, shrinking back.

...

“ It doesn’t hurt a bit,” said Paul. “ It only just nips rather nicely.”

“ No,” she still cried, shaking her black curls and shrinking.

...

“ I only wanted to try,” she said in a low voice.

...

He waited grimly, and watched. At last Miriam let the bird peck from her hand. She gave a little cry—fear, and pain because of fear—rather pathetic. But she had done it, and she did it again...

This incident is interesting since it enables us to learn about Miriam without Paul's interference; the characterisation drawn is of a sensitive (defensive?) girl, shy in nature yet willing to learn if provided with the opportunity and encouragement.[4]

This characterisation is dismissed once we move on to Part II. The opening paragraphs of Chapter 7 seem to be fixating her identity as what Paul seeks to see her as – mystical and possessive. Her possessiveness is made evident at various points in the chapter; one incident is when she smothers her brother with 'love'.

"What do you make such a FUSS for?" cried Paul, all in suffering because of her extreme emotion. "Why can't you be ordinary with him?"

For Paul, Miriam acts in a frenzy which he directly contrasts with his mother's reserved demeanour. He treats her poorly for her 'failings' as he sees them, but he hardly attempts to look beyond his blinkered judgements. In the chapter, it is always Paul looking at Miriam and never Miriam looking at herself. He sees her as he wants her to be and ignores (as well as detests) the unwanted characteristics; even her resolve to learn which was appreciated in Part I is dismissed.

"Why do I like this so?"

Always something in his breast shrank from these close, intimate, dazzled looks of hers.

...

“ It’s because—it’s because there is scarcely any shadow in it; it’s more shimmery... That seems dead to me. Only this shimmeriness is the real living. The shape is a dead crust. The shimmer is inside really.”

And she, with her little finger in her mouth, would ponder these sayings. They gave her a feeling of life again...She managed to find some meaning in his struggling, abstract speeches...

The fence episode and the extract above are evidences of Miriam attempting to move out of her ‘ misty’ state by holding on to Paul’s abstract speeches and getting closer to him – as she reaches out to the ‘ shimmeriness’ which is ‘ real living’. But, as she does so, Paul hates her. It seems as if he is bound by force to not embrace what Miriam offers him by their communion.[5] It can also be argued that it is his mother’s influence which rules his life.

So, while he was away with Miriam, Mrs. Morel grew more and more worked up.

She glanced at the clock and said, coldly and rather tired:

“ You have been far enough to-night.”

His soul, warm and exposed from contact with the girl, shrank.

“ You must have been right home with her,” his mother continued.

He would not answer.

Even though he enjoys and desires Miriam’s company, he is constantly drawn back to his mother; it is this conflict which is evident throughout the

narrative. In the chapter, the narrative doesn't pretend to be fair to Miriam, for all Paul hates in Miriam are her faults, not his. He detests moving closer to her emotionally because of her blasphemous possessiveness; at first, he doesn't realise that it is his mother's possessiveness that forbids him from bonding well with Miriam. Even when he realises so, he doesn't attempt to rectify it since the conflict is too complicated to be resolved.

The ambiguity of Paul's consciousness also affects his characterisation of Miriam and leaves us with an incomplete picture. Paul's point of view is plagued by 'confusion, self-deception and desperate self-justification'[6] which constantly clouds his opinions about Miriam. If so, it is difficult to determine the 'truthful' characterisation of Miriam. And yet, Miriam's portrait has to arise from the constant 'doing' and 'undoing' of Paul's narrative; the 'painting' and 'overpainting' produces a 'strange and unique tension' in the chapter which is left unresolved.[7] Even till the end, Paul is left struggling to resolve his conflicted state of being both moored to his mother and emotionally drawn to Miriam at the same time.

The 'doing' and 'undoing' of (Paul's) narrative in the chapter enables the characterisation of Miriam to be embellished with the texture of refined interiority. The first step to acknowledging the complexity of her character is to accept that Miriam can exist apart from what the narrative allows her to be. If so, she is simultaneously sensitive and possessive and vital and restrained. Also, Miriam's character is shaped by all that is said in the narration, yet she is also shaped by all that is not said. As per the narrative, she is the hysteric and yet, no so. It is true that Miriam transforms anything to become religious; she simultaneously accepts and rejects her sexuality.



But, is Miriam the only hysteric of the novel, as the narration would have us believe? Or to extend the argument, is Miriam even the hysteric?

Perhaps. The former question is more important for discussing the narrative strategy; there is textual evidence of Miriam having accepted her sexuality despite having been in denial earlier (and been afraid of it).

...But there was a serpent in her Eden ... she was afraid she did want him. She stood self-convicted. Then came an agony of new shame ... Did she want Paul Morel, and did he know she wanted him? .... Yet there she stood under the self-accusation of wanting him, tied to that stake of torture ...

On the contrary, Paul is vehement in his denial of any sexual tension existing between him and Miriam; he only saw their relationship as a ' platonic friendship' and ' stoutly denied there was anything else between them'. If so, he is definitely the hysteric too, for he splits himself into an artistic (intellectual)companion while harbouring unsatiated sexual passion for Miriam. This further strengthens the argument of the narratorial voice and Paul merging into a singular narrative which projects Paul (and his identity) onto Miriam. Unable to handle his own identity as a hysteric, all Paul can do is to project himself on to Miriam and lay the blame on her for everything that happens.

On a similar note, the narrative strategy of the text can be further explored by reining the different theoretical approaches to it, though it might seem repetitive at times. For instance, it is accepted that Paul's consciousness and viewpoint is what governs the narrative; this has already been validated with sufficient textual evidence. However, it is also of consequence that narrative

is not just about what it says it is, for what it 'tells' is not always what it wants to 'show'. The novel doesn't 'say what it means or mean what it says'[8]; there's always the 'unconscious of the work' itself which brings out the multiple texts within the larger text. As an extension of psychoanalytical criticism, it is imperative to look at the multiple texts of the interior(sub-texts) at points of 'ambiguity, evasion or over-emphasis' and look at what has not been said (and how they have not been said)[9].

Similarly, another theoretical approach that can be employed in the text focuses on breaking down Paul's supremacy in the narrative; it seeks to look for moments in the text which undo the tale that the text is about Paul. Sons and Lovers has often been called both a bildungsroman and kunstroman in the sense that it is Paul's story of his growth into maturity. However, it is quite evident that the text isn't just about Paul or his life; there are many other characters who challenge his heroic status (prominently his mother, Miriam, and Clara). The text undoes itself by its own narrative strategy which is ambiguous and distorted. It is never just Paul's narrative but the narratives of Paul, Mrs Morel, Miriam, and Clara intermeshed into a singular narrative. If so, the disruptive moments in the narrative have to be analysed to gain access to the 'interior' of the text.

Going by its narrative strategy, Sons and Lovers is a novel of interiority which attempts to explore what the 'interior' of the text entails; the 'interior' is dynamic, complex, ambivalent, and often, distorted. The narration of the text shifts from the traditional omniscient narration to a more ambivalent narrative which leads to the disintegration of 'singular truths' and the inclusion of multiple points of views. There's disruption between

what the narration seeks to ‘tell’ and ‘show’ which is exemplified in the characterisation of Miriam in Chapter 7. Moreover, the constant ‘doing’/‘undoing’ of the narrative highlights the numerous conflicts that occur within the text; the conflicts enable engagement of diverse points of views in a singular narrative.

Though the ambivalent narrative is sustained throughout the novel, it isn’t endowed with any sense of closure. The ideological conflicts are sustained throughout and most characters are left entangled in their messy spots; there has been a suspension of authorial intent, but the constant doing/undoing of the narration doesn’t even evince satisfactory narratorial intent per se. If so, the ambivalent narration seems to exist only to enable the exploration of the ‘interior’ of the text and unravel the distorted complexities existing within.

## Notes

- <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/217/217-h/217-h.htm>
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- Eagleton, Terry. “Psychoanalysis.” *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2015. 151-55. Print.

[1] <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/26137-never-trust-the-teller-trust-the-tale-the-proper-function>[2] Martz, Louis. L. (1996). A Portrait of Miriam: A Study of the Design of Sons and Lovers. In Rick Rylance, Houndmills, & <https://assignbuster.com/narrative-voice-in-sons-and-lovers/>

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[3] Martz, Louis. L. (1996). *A Portrait of Miriam: A Study of the Design of Sons and Lovers*. In Rick Rylance, Houndmills, & Basingstoke ( Eds.), *New*

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[6] Martz, Louis. L. (1996). *A Portrait of Miriam: A Study of the Design of Sons and Lovers*. In Rick Rylance, Houndmills, & Basingstoke ( Eds.), *New*

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