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Rediscovering Tragic Female Characters in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*

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Abstract:

"*Sons and Lovers*" is the most autobiographical of D H Lawrence's novels published in 1913. It is often called the magnum opus in the realm of literature. Lawrence is the minute observer of man and woman relationship. The female characters play dominant role in his novels. They represent certain thoughts and ideas. *Sons and Lovers* presents three prominent female characters—Mrs Morel, Miriam and Clara Dawes. These three women are all tragic characters and their tragedies lie in the fact that they only function as stones in Paul's life and the world of men and their suffering from the imprisonment of the patriarchal society. Mrs Morel is pitifully diagnosed with Oedipus complex, which enables her to be a powerful hermaphrodite and gains access to power. Miriam is imprisoned by Victorian morality, but her world is not purely spiritual. Clara is the woman who makes Paul a real man, but Paul only sees the physical aspect of her. So Paul's patriarchal character is revealed in the discussion of these three women. This paper attempts to show that these three women are wholly responsible for their own tragedy giving an analysis of the Victorian morality and industrial civilization.

Keywords: autobiographical; magnum opus; Oedipus complex; patriarchal.

Introduction

Sons and Lovers, (1913) originally titled "Paul Morel" is largely autobiographical and it is a psychological realistic representative work. It has a strong autobiographic air, so it is called the best representation of Sigmund Freud's "Oedipus Complex" theory by critics. As modern literature theory progresses, researchers have realized that the substantial content of *Sons and Lovers* cannot be summarized by "Oedipus Complex". As a growth novel, the hero—Paul's growth is indispensable from Mrs Morel—his mother; Miriam—his first lover; Clara—his second lover. These three women constitute a firm support from soul, spirit, and flesh, and support Paul to pursue his so-called perfect humanity, to become a real man. Even though Daniel wrote in his *The Consciousness of D. H. Lawrence: An Intellectual Biography* (1986), "In fact, all the three women—mother, Miriam, Clara—all made Paul feel that he was prisoned" (p. 70). When Paul ended the three relationships desperately, went to his own future, we can see a patriarchal, self-centred, and sadistic male Chauvinist. All these three women, including Mrs Morel, become victims of the patriarchal society and the stones in Paul's life road to success, to some extent. This paper tries to analyse the three tragic women and their tragic flaws. The author hopes that the analysis can strengthen the work of the connotation of the thought and deeper understanding of Lawrence works.

Mrs Morel—Paul's soul support

Mrs Gertrude Morel, the mother of Paul is a woman of dauntless and daunting character. "Son and Lovers", deals with her disillusionment in marriage; the gradual rejection of her husband Mr Morel, and largely depending on her sons. First she commanded William and then Paul. She loved them and also had disastrous effect of this unnatural; but unbreakable bond of their emotional life.

Lawrence has very vividly portrayed her initial frustration leading to her final decline and disintegration through great emotional strains. Unable to find any fulfilment in her relations with her husband, she gradually casts him off and turns to her sons for emotional satisfaction. The sons too were deeply attached to her. As long as William and Paul were young children, her relationship appeared to be healthy. Admittedly, it was she, who wanted them to rise in life and urged them to aspire for higher things. But as they grew into adulthood, their relationship with their mother assumed an unhealthy complexion and explicit sexual overtones could be clearly felt in it as Mrs Morel herself revealed, "*You know Paul-I've never had a husband-not really.*"(p-87). She took her sons as husband-substitutes. The moment they grew economically independent, they instinctively stepped into the role of their mother's husband. But howsoever, satisfying this relationship might be to Mrs Morel, it caused great strains on their minds. When William sought fulfilment outside, Mrs Morel could not tolerate it. He was torn between passion and love for his mother and unable to overcome this conflict, he ultimately died of pneumonia.

Although this abnormal maternal love helped her sons become outstanding, it also held back free growth of individuality, caused their thought variant and their personality split. Firstly, Mrs Morel's existence was the only support to Paul's life road to become an artist. We can say that without Mrs Morel's support, Paul's dream could not come true. So Paul could not draw after Mrs Morel's death. "*Everything seemed to have gone smash for the young man. He could not paint. The picture he finished on the day of his mother's death—one that he felt the most satisfied with—was the last thing he did*"(LI, 1998, p. 85). Secondly, in this "Oedipus Complex", perhaps Paul did not love his mother so much. He loved her only because he wanted to get some profits. In other words, Paul skilfully took advantage of his mother. Mrs Morel knew that it was hard to be a woman, so she dreamt of becoming a man, but she could not understand man's position in society, she did not see through man's ways to make use of woman. While as a man, Paul knew the rules of taking advantage of woman himself. Through loving his mother, he could get what he had been dreaming of. Once his father was sent to hospital because of industrial injury, he said to his mother with joy "*I'm the host in the house now*" (Lugo, 1996, p. 165). In order to be "the host in the house", he even prayed for his father's death. In this proud state, Paul did not take his mother's feeling into consideration. So it was no surprising that the mother was deserted by her beloved son when she had no use to her son. This was Mrs Morel's life. She put her children at arms, projected her own ideal and life view on her children, and hoped so as to fill the feelings of vacuum. Although this abnormal love helped her children stand out among their fellows, led to their mentality variation and personality split. She should be responsible for this abnormal love, no matter what position she held in her son's growth. Mrs Morel got only the coloured utilizable repay, she did not always fulfil her emotion's need, which was her most tragic thing.

Miriam—Paul's Spirit Support

Paul's first lover, Miriam, was a beautiful and shy girl. She is modelled after Jessie Chambers, the one-time close friend of Lawrence. Many of the incidents in which Paul and Miriam are involved together were written by Jessie herself and Lawrence incorporated the passages supplied by her in the novel virtually without any change. Miriam is the daughter of Mr and Mrs Leivers of the Willey Farm. Although living in a country village which was controlled by her father and brothers who looked down upon her, she was irreconcilable to mediocrity. She did not want to follow the same old disastrous road of average village girls; she looked forward to making life meaningful. Learning is the only distinction to which she thinks to aspire. It would be unjust to her to attribute her desire for knowledge to mere vanity. Her interest in intellectual pursuits is partially genuine. But in reality there was no such room for her to exist; what she had was just the freedom of imagine. Paul's appearing made Miriam

have her own idol, but this love soon added pain to her life because of her religious zeal. Since she was very young, Miriam sincerely believed in religion which played a major role in her life. She thought “*God was omnipotent, and He knew everything in the world*” (Miller, 1980, p. 256). So even her love to Paul may request the permission of the God: “*O’Lord, let me not love Paul Morel. Keep me from loving him, if I ought not to love him*” (Drabele, 1993, p. 128). We can see that under religion’s control, Miriam’s emotion severely depressed. She was only a doll, without anything of her own idea. Miriam consciously built their intimate relationship on imagination, namely spirit on love, not flesh on love. We can say man-centred family atmosphere and sincerely believing in religion were just like undershirt firmly bound Miriam’s spirit world, formed her first tragedy. But it was this tragic girl who was Paul’s bosom friend to his art natural gift and ability. Miriam herself had artist’s ability, so she could stimulate Paul’s creative inspiration. Like Mrs Morel, Miriam kept an eye on Paul’s art creation, but the mother paid more attention to the achievement and fame that brought by art, while Miriam focused on her lover’s deeper things of nature, the great enthusiasm to art. Therefore Paul became Miriam’s soul mate, seeking spiritual solace and intuition creativity stimulation. This was different from Mrs Morel’s love. When he was in contact with Miriam, he got insight, a more profound vision. From his mother, he got the warmth of life and the strength for creativity, but Miriam changed this warmth into art enthusiasm, just like white light. But to this spiritual confidant, Paul’s return was mean. Paul was a pure male chauvinism, so he never took the status of women into account, even if he thought about it, it was from his own point of view. Many critics noticed that it was Miriam’s love that made Paul’s spirit tend to mature, but few mentioned Miriam’s growth and changes in this bildungsroman. Miriam felt deeply hurt when her change, the representation of the female-centred world, was rejected by Paul. This was her early figure—“a spiritual girl” who was imprisoned by Victorian morality and religious idea and got pure sensory and intelligent exchange, but Paul sedulously neglected her change and growth, so he rejected to cooperate with her, and finally he destroyed her love. In fact, soon after falling in love with Paul, Miriam’s spirit world began to change: “*Sometimes, as they were walking together, she slipped her arm timidly into his. But he always resented it, and she knew it. It caused a violent conflict in him*” (Lawrence, 1994, p. 194). Paul did not seem to know that Miriam’s exist as a woman. He never entered her world, even never wanted to try. How could he know her? Miriam actively tried again and again, but Paul said: “*You are a nun—you are a nun*” (Lawrence, 1994, p. 297). The words went into her heart again and again. He never took her position into consideration, Paul almost capriciously took action according to his own emotional power. At last, Miriam recognized the essence of their relationship. Nevertheless, the sincerity of her love cannot be doubted. The responsibility for her failure in love does not lie only with her; Paul is equally to be blamed for her tragedy. If Miriam is inhibited on account of her religiosity, Paul is inhibited because of the mother-pull.

Clara—Paul’s Flesh Support

Clara Dawes is the daughter of an old friend of Mrs Leivers. Her husband, Baxter Dawes, is a smith at Jordan’s. She is separated from her husband and is temporarily lodged with her mother. She is presented as a foil to Miriam. If Miriam represents the spirit, she represents the flesh. If Miriam is sexually inhibited, she is sexually aggressive. Commenting on the thematic relevance of Clara, Harry T. Moore writes, “*Clara’s blonde Junoesque brings an element into the story that is needed, for this ripe woman is an effective foil to both the aging mother and the dreaming farm girl. Because the relationship with Clara is primarily and almost exclusively physical, there is plenty of dramatic contrast.*”

Although in front of Mrs Morel and Miriam, Paul was ashamed to show his yearning for flesh, but in his heart, this desire could not restrain. He needed a woman, who would be more mature and bold than Miriam, who could bring him out of hibernation. Clara was the very woman. Lawrence moulded Clara as opposite figure of Miriam. To Paul, if Miriam was a spirit symbol, then Clara was a flesh symbol. From Clara, Paul indeed got "*passion of pleasant sensation*", this was "*the passion of baptism of fire*", this successful attempting was "*a healing to his wounded heart which was hurt because his desire was not satisfied*" (Millet, 1970, p. 345).

Basically Clara is a simple, affectionate and unambitious girl. She is neither sensitive nor intellectual like Miriam. But there is an air of sincerity about her. She feels humiliated by the brutality of her husband and affects a scornful attitude towards all men. When Paul meets her for the first time, he is struck by her "slightly lifted upon lip that did not know whether it was raised in scorn of all men or out of eagerness to be kissed." Paul, in fact, develops a liking for her because she has a grudge against man. However, when he meets her again, he soon discovers that the upward lifting of her face was misery and not scorn. Her hostility to men is a mere pretence. She suffers from extreme loneliness and there is a feeling of restless hunger below her outward composure. When Paul asks her if she is happy after her separation from her husband, she remarks that she will be happy so long as he can be free and independent. But this is only a hollow consolation. There is a definite tragic air about her.

However she is an independent and emancipated woman. She is too self-respecting to take down laying all the cruel strokes of fate. She refuses to meekly submit to her husband's inhuman behaviour and leaves him. She does not make any spiritual demands on Paul. She is sensuous and passionate. She realizes that Paul needs passion and she offers him that immensity of passion which Miriam could not. Whenever he meets Clara, he finds her physical appeal almost irresistible. After Clara gets employed at Jordan's, Paul and Clara get closer to each other. This is the period when he is feeling weary of the soul-sucking affair with Miriam. He needs an outlet for his passion and there could be none as suited for this purpose as Clara. The two bring to each other some real fulfilment. In his essay, "*Counterfeit Lovers*", Mark Spilka writes, "*For her, Clara admires his animal quickness: brings her the promise of renewed vitality, and they draw close together and make love, once Paul has broken away from Miriam. Thus Paul receives the impersonal love he needs; the real, real flame of feeling through another person's and Clara comes to full awakening as woman.*"

However, the intensity of passion experienced by them during this period does not continue for long. Soon it appears to be marked with anxiety and uncertainty and starts declining. Their consummation has been a moment of unique bliss precariously achieved and ephemeral in nature. Clara feels that there was something in him she hated, a sort of detached criticism of herself, a coldness which made her woman's soul hardened against him.

Like Paul-Miriam relationship, the Paul-Clara relationship also ends in a fiasco. It should be very clear that the failure in this case cannot be attributed to the mother-pull. Clara fits in better with Paul's relationship with his mother than Miriam could ever do. She takes care of his sexual needs and leaves plenty of him over for Mrs Morel. We are also told that Mrs Morel is not hostile to the idea of Clara; in fact, she finds Paul's relationship with her quite wholesome. And still, this relationship fails. Its failure is due to a certain inadequacy in itself. Firstly, Paul instinctively realizes that Clara is too physical to keep his soul steady for long.

This is also Mrs Morel's feeling about her. Thus, this relationship is too trivial and superficial to be lasting. Secondly, what Paul offers Clara is too impersonal a kind of love. During Mrs Morel's illness, Paul goes to Clara purely for his comfort. The misery of her suffering is too much for him; and he seeks escape in his love-making. On such occasions even when she gives herself to him, there is fear and hatred in her eyes.

Conclusion

Above all, in fact, *Sons and Lovers* described three types of love: Paul and his mother, Paul and Miriam, and Paul and Clara. The first type was maternal love; the second type was spiritual love; and the third type was flesh love. Lawrence racked his brains to form the three types of love, to emphasize women's strength and their great might in men's growth. But under the surface of this love, in the Paul-centred atmosphere, we can find three tragic women standing bitterly. We can even see the 20th century women's self-awareness, fighting and dim the epitome of failure. The tragedy has historical, social, and personal factors. In fact, the three women in *Sons and Lovers* are irreconcilable to be controlled by life. They showed initial awakening consciousness of women, but they chose wrong directions and ways, eventually they were led to the failure of the same fate. Paul swung among the three women, and made full use of them, even caused damage to them, but this achieved his own spiritual growth and the pursuit of human nature. At this point, Mrs Morel, Miriam and Clara should be responsible for their own tragedy. In this sense, the article did critical analysis of these three women understanding their tragic flaws.

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