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Walter Morel: Irresponsible or Responsibility Distrusted

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The general critical consensus on D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*(1913) is that Lawrence has done injustice to his own father by presenting him as an irresponsible, uncouth and beastly figure under the shadow of Walter Morel. He himself "came to think that he had done injustice in *Sons and Lovers*"¹. "Less than ten years after he completed *Sons and Lovers*", as Harry T. Moore comments, "Lawrence expressed the wish that he could re-write it in fairness to his father"². In fact, while portraying Walter Morel he was only "justifying a private grudge of his own"³. The grudge that he had in his mind was only the result of seeing his father "in childhood and youth...through the prejudiced eyes of his mother"⁴. But for a moment, if we keep the "unashamedly autobiographical"⁵ elements of *Sons and Lovers* at bay, and try to re-examine it keeping in mind the famous Lawrentian dictum "[T]rust the tale, not the teller", Walter Morel may possibly emerge as someone who was always distrusted with responsibility by his creator Lawrence himself. We would realize that there was a continual chance of his becoming a responsible and caring husband and father; we would discover a number of positive aspects of Walter, which owing to the lack of a fair treatment remain latent; never coming out as prominent. Had Lawrence been fair enough in writing the novel, "Walter Morel", as thinks Blake Morrison "might have flourished in a different relationship" instead of being "lost out by marrying someone too much his opposite"⁶. At the opening of *Sons and Lovers* Lawrence introduces Walter Morel as a "well set-up, erect and very smart"⁷ young man. But at the same time he warns us that "[T]here was nothing at all at the back of his show"⁸. Lawrence even makes him admit: "I'm like a pig's tail"⁹ which also foreshadows that there is scarcely any scope of his development in the novel; he is unlikely to play any substantial role. It seems Lawrence uses Walter only as a counter-foil against Gertrude Morel. In fact, he presents Walter in the binary system where Walter seems to occupy the right side of the adjectives like bad, irresponsible, uncaring etc. against the good, responsible, caring Gertrude Morel who seems to be associated with the left or superior side. Walter Morel is always blamed for his habit of drinking; but examining closely the comments of Lawrence as the narrator, he scarcely seems to put the blame on alcohol; he himself vindicates: "[H]e drank rather heavily, though no more than any other miner"¹⁰. However heavily he drank, it scarcely told upon his profession since Lawrence himself clarifies: "[H]e practically never had to miss his work owing to his drinking"¹¹. Apart from his profession, Walter is portrayed to be a very useful person for his domestic household works. Lawrence's complimenting Walter as "remarkably a handy man"¹² proves his skill and usefulness. In a very short notice he "could make or mend anything"¹³. Lawrence also tells us that working out such tasks always make him happy. As the novel progresses, we get to learn that Walter was "always very gentle if anyone was ill"¹⁴. It is out of such gentility that at the birth of William, when Mrs. Morel was very ill, "Morel was good to her, as good as gold"¹⁵. Nevertheless, unfortunately, that goodness never gets the chance to bloom to the full; not

only the narratives but the readers' attention also deviate from a satisfying possibility to the so-called flaws of his persona. Such kinds of occasions play a key role to the making of an intimate and successful conjugal relationship. But, since "Lawrence's intention and the intention of the novel are disparate"¹⁶, the relationship pathetically turns out to be a bitter struggle to the Morels.

Besides being a handy man at the domestic household works, Walter is also described as a very useful family man who does not like to bother his wife for his own morning arrangements; rather prefers to undertake the task by himself. Hence, we read a fine detailing of Walter's morning household works that he cheerily carries out:

Morel always rose early, about five or six O' clock in the morning, whether holiday or workday. On Sunday morning he would get up and prepare breakfast...the child would get up with his father, while the mother lay in bed for another hour so.¹⁷

There is another such fine representation of a happy and warm atmosphere reverberating in the house:

On Tuesday morning, Morel rose early. He was in good spirits. Quite early before six O' clock she heard him whistling away to himself downstairs...His wife lay listening to him tinkering away in the garden.... It always gave her a sense of warmth and peace to hear him thus as she lay in bed....¹⁸

Although all of the children were vehemently against their father, still we discover some affectionate moment, which betrays Walter in the most pleasant bearing with his child William:

He (William) was fond of his father, who was very affectionate, indulgent and full of ingenuity to amuse the child ... The two played together and Mrs. Morel used to wonder which was the truer baby.¹⁹

Therefore, here we find a substantial glimpse of a warm father-son relationship we never see repeated with the other children. In place of reliving such lively episodes, we see "[A]ll the children, particularly Paul....peculiarly against their father"²⁰. This seems to be quite unnatural that none of the children likes to remain with the father; although he is such a fascinating storyteller regarding which Lawrence says: "Morel had a warm way of telling a story. He made one feel Taffy's cunning"²¹. It is very uncanny if not odd, that how easily his children learn to ignore the superb storyteller whereas children are naturally ardent fan of listening to stories.

If we put together the fragmented positive nuances of Walter Morel, we might presumably say that had Lawrence felt the minimal inclination to draw Walter Morel into a

complete character he always had ample scope to do that. However, since his intention differed, he chose to do the other way. Still, knowingly or unknowingly, Lawrence provided such qualities, which though sporadic in nature, are very important to perceive the good man beneath the drastic and irresponsible figure. One might well wonder why Lawrence desired to do justice not only to Walter Morel, but to his own father also. Perhaps Lawrence himself became aware of the worth hidden behind the rugged individuality, which could easily qualify Walter as the real man in the house in the true sense of the term. As a reader, one cannot help feeling that there was always scope of turning the character into a sensitive, responsible and loving human being. However, with much astonishment, we see Walter gradually fading from the novel and after the initial three chapters of *Sons and Lovers*, we scarcely feel his existence in the novel. Lawrence's rendition of Walter Morel reminds us E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novels* (1927) where he classifies character into two categories: "flat" and "round". Walter Morel, seen from Forster's point of view falls in the "flat" category since Walter hardly undergoes any significant development; he remains static throughout the novel; never gets the chance of being "modified or modify the happenings"²² in spite of possessing so many interesting persona in his nature. Even, in the Lawrentian ethos Walter remains almost the same if one cares to pay attention to his famous conviction of "relatedness". Unlike the other important characters of *Sons and Lovers*, he is barely seen to have established any kind of relatedness with anybody or any other thing. Actually, upon re-examining the character of Walter Morel all throughout *Sons and Lovers* the single word that readily comes to mind - distrusted. Had the novelist, D.H. Lawrence have trust in both- Walter Morel as well as his father Arthur Lawrence, we might have the privilege to see him in a different light.

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