

The Transition from Realism to Modernism in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*

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Abstract

The present paper tries to locate elements of modernism in D.H. Lawrence's novel, *Sons and Lovers*. Modernism in English literature began in the early twentieth century when writers started expressing the innermost thoughts and feelings of their characters in their writings. D.H. Lawrence's works came at an important juncture in the history of English literature. His writings questioned the moral and literary conventions of his time. Although his works are generally regarded as realist in nature, but still they present some distinct characteristics which were absent in the realist writings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century period. The paper delineates such characteristics and how they make *Sons and Lovers* a unique work of interest for literary studies.

Keywords: Modernism, Realism, Novel, Symbolism, Conventions

Introduction

The Modernist movement beginning in the early years of the twentieth century brought radical changes in art, literature, philosophy, sociology and psychology as understood by the 19th century western world. Modernism in literature stressed upon the idea of individuality, the inner self and consciousness. Modernist writers of the 20th century began experimenting with different narrative techniques. The beginning of the modernist movement is generally believed to be around the beginning of the First World War in 1914. Although in his essay 'Rethinking Modernism', Lyn Pykett argues that there is no fixed date and time when modernism began.

“Modernism is variously: an aesthetic programme, a self-conscious artistic movement, a retrospective descriptive category, a way of periodizing literary history, and/or a means of constructing a canon of value. The ‘moment’ of modernism is thus difficult to fix.” (Pykett)

Sons and Lovers

Sons and Lovers by D.H. Lawrence was published in the year 1913, one year before the start of the First World War. It was his third novel and is one of the ground-breaking novels of the 20th century English Literature. It is regarded by many critics as the best of D.H Lawrence’s work. The novel tells the story of the members of Morel family and their relations with each other as well as other people. Lawrence’s focus in “Sons and Lovers” is on the relationship of Mrs. Morel and her sons, especially Paul Morel. Their relationship is so strong that it does not let Paul form a concrete and meaningful relationship with any other women in his life. Lawrence’s own letter written to Edward Garnett in 1912 explains what the novel is about:

“It follows this idea: a woman of character and refinement goes into the lower class, and has no satisfaction in her own life. She has had a passion for her husband, so the children are born of passion, and have heaps of vitality. But as her sons grow up she selects them as lovers—first the eldest, then the second. These sons are urged into life by their reciprocal love of their mother—urged on and on. But when they come to manhood, they can’t love, because their mother is the strongest power in their lives, and holds them . . . As soon as the young men come into contact with women, there’s a split. William gives his sex to a fribble, and his mother holds his soul. But the split kills him, because he doesn’t know where he is. The next son gets a woman who fights for his soul— fights his mother. The son loves the mother—all the sons hate and are jealous of the father. The battle goes on between the mother and the girl, with the son as object. The mother gradually proves stronger, because of the tie of blood. The son decides to leave his soul in his mother’s hands, and, like his elder brother, go for passion. He gets passion. Then the split begins to tell again. But, almost unconsciously, the mother realises what is the matter, and begins to die. The son casts off his mistress, attends to his mother dying. He is left in the end naked of everything,

with the drift towards death. It is a great tragedy, and I tell you I've written a great book. It's the tragedy of thousands of young men in England . . ." (Lawrence 1912)

Paul Morel's complex relationship with his mother, Gertrude Morel effects his relationship with other women, mainly Miriam Leivers and Clara Dawes. The story of the novel is based on Lawrence's own life and therefore many critics categorize it as an auto-biographical novel. Michael Bell writes about the auto-biographical element of the novel in his essay 'A Restrained, Somewhat Impersonal Novel':

"*Sons and Lovers* was the first of Lawrence's novels in which a motive of self-understanding became paramount. In this book Lawrence gave fictional expression to the intense relationship with his own mother which had, in its possessiveness, checked his capacity in early manhood, or before meeting Frieda Weekley, to give himself fully to another woman. As is well known, the figure of Miriam Leivers is closely based on his own girlfriend of adolescence, Jessie Chambers." (Bell 31-32)

The novel is divided into two parts. The first part is focused mostly on Mrs. Morel's life and her marital relations with Walter Morel. The second part of the novel is focused on Paul Morel's life, relationships and his innermost emotions, thoughts and feelings. In this paper, the focus will be on the various elements of Modernism that can be discerned in *Sons and Lovers*.

Shift from the Realist mode

The use of the third person omniscient narrator in the novel is indicative of the realist mode of writing which was used in the 19th century novels. But Lawrence's deviations from this mode are apparent when the perspective is shifted from one character to another, unlike the realist novel where the perspective remains on a single central character. Although the story is about Paul but Paul is not even born yet when the novel begins. The beginning chapters are focused on Gertrude Morel's life and her viewpoint. In the second half of the novel, Lawrence focuses on Paul Morel and his innermost thoughts, consciousness. This part of the novel is an indicator of Lawrence's shift from realism to new forms.

"In *Sons and Lovers*, the contingent and the essential—whatever lights up the writer's imagination as real—are conveyed through an objective style that interacts with

subjective modes of vision. Rather than monolithic realism, a fluid interaction of styles animates and sustains an expressive image of life.” (Stewart 156)

As Jack Stewart points out in the above quote from his essay ‘Forms of Expressions in *Sons and Lovers*’, Lawrence did not rely entirely on realism in *Sons and Lovers*, rather he is experimenting with a number of different styles. Some critics do not put Lawrence’s works into the category of high modernist writers like Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf etc. because of his use of realism. About this Jack Stewart writes: “But to take *Sons and Lovers* as simply “realistic” is to neglect much of the novel’s richness—or to expand the concept of realism beyond recognizable limits.” (Stewart 155)

The realism used by Lawrence was accompanied by various styles like expressionism, impressionism, symbolism etc. These styles are used by Lawrence in *Sons and Lovers* to move beyond the realm of simple realism and to provide a more artistic and wholesome view about the deeper innermost thoughts and consciousness of the characters and the surroundings.

Discussion of Sexual Relations

The novel addresses the issues of passion, sexual desires and sexual wholesomeness. The 19th century realist novels held back on the notion of sexuality because it was considered immoral and discussion about sexuality was repressed by religious authorities. Lawrence addresses this issue of sexuality through his novel. Paul is not able to have a successful relationship with Miriam because she is inclined towards religion and considers the sexual act as a sin. Even when Paul persuades her to engage in the sexual act with him, she agrees reluctantly. Paul is not able to get sexual gratification from Miriam, which causes a crisis in their relationship and he is attracted towards Clara Dawes, a suffragette, feminist women separated from her husband. They develop a very passionate relationship which is mostly sexual in nature. There is no love on deeper level between Clara and Paul. Ultimately Clara leaves Paul and goes back to her husband and her relationship with Paul comes to an end, leaving Paul devastated. Thus, Lawrence expresses his view on sexuality by showing that neither an entirely spiritual nor an entirely sexual relationship between couples can be successful.

Sex is portrayed as something which is serious, normal and is the central concern of human life. Paul's relationship with Miriam is a recognition that without sex, marriage would not be successful. Paul's passion for Clara is serious and central to his growth and there is power and mystery in sexual passion. Paul's dissatisfaction with Miriam and partial satisfaction with Clara deals with the assertion of life of body.

Lawrence's openness in discussing sexual relations in *Sons and Lovers* was a very new and bold move for the time. Many people labelled it as obscene due its depiction of an overtly sexual attraction between Paul and his mother, Mrs. Morel. This relation between mother and son was not depicted in any of the realist novels and is a significant departure from the realist tradition.

"The sexual bond between mother and son is established early on. "Paul loved to sleep with his mother," we're told. When she accompanies Paul to the interview for his first job, at Jordan's factory, she behaves "like a sweetheart" and both of them feel "the excitement of lovers having an adventure together". "Why can't a man have a young mother?" he exclaims, "I'll never marry while I've got you." The incestuous undercurrents come to the surface in chapter eight, with a "long, fervent kiss". If we're unsure what to make of the kiss, the drunken Walter Morel, returning home, leaves us in no doubt: "At your mischief again?" he snarls. In the aftermath, father and son nearly come to blows. But Mrs Morel forestalls them by fainting, and while Paul comforts and revives her Walter stumbles off to bed. "Don't sleep with him, Mother," the son pleads, and in doing so recognises that "he still loved his mother best". (Morrison)

The relationship of mother and son is similar to that described by Sigmund Freud, a psychologist, in his theory of the Oedipus complex. But Lawrence had not read Freud's work while writing *Sons and Lovers* and he himself dismissed the idea that his novel was based on the Oedipus complex theory. However, Lawrence dealt with the concept of the son's attraction towards his mother and the casting away of father (Walter Morel), which was labelled as Oedipus complex by Freud. Freud's psychoanalysis had a major influence on the modernist writers. Lawrence's awareness about the changing times in the modern world is

evident from his implementation of the Oedipus complex theory in his novel, without being aware of it.

Use of Symbolism

In the novel numerous symbolisms have been used by Lawrence. Symbols such as light symbolizes rational, daily, routine life and is most associated with Mrs. Morel. Darkness symbolizes the phenomenon and mystery of existence as well as the human subconscious and brute instinct. This quality is demonstrated in Walter Morel who works in the dark mines. According to Lawrence, light and dark were essential to one another. Darkness has a special symbolic effectiveness throughout the novel. It adds tragic poise to various scenes and symbolizes the darkness of death. When Williams' body is brought back home, the Morels gravely bring the long, heavy casket out of the dark night and into the candle lit parlour. Towards the end of the novel Paul walks away from the dark, deserted country fields - towards the bright city lights. This has been interpreted as Paul's walking away from death, towards life.

Blood is another important symbol having great significance throughout the novel. The following is one such example: "The whole of his blood seemed to burst in to flames and he could scarcely breathe... his blood was concentrated like a flame in his chest." (Lawrence) These lines refer to the passion felt for Miriam by Paul as they walked side by side. Blood also makes its presence felt when Walter Morel throws an object with violence at Gertrude Morel and some blood shedding takes place:

"He (Walter Morel) was turning drearily away, when he saw a drop of blood fall from the averted wound into the baby's fragile, glistening hair. Fascinated he watched the heavy dark drop hang in the glistening cloud, and pull down the gossamer. Another drop fell. It would soak through the baby's scalp. He watched, fascinated, feeling it soak in; then, finally, his manhood broke." (Lawrence 2015)

Nature is also a very prevailing symbol in the novel. Flowers have a role in revealing the psychological traits of the characters, and even the sky very symbolically change colours according to the characters' moods. It turns red when Mrs. Morel is upset and angry and black when there is a foreshadowing of death and distress. It appears to be a glittering and shining blue when Paul is outside in the countryside with the women he loves. Mrs. Morel's

experience with the lilies when she puts her head deep inside the flower and when her face is smeared with pollen grains golden in colour has been described in very unambiguous and symbolic language.

Through these symbolisms, the novel is focused on the individual's consciousness, which was an important aspect of the Modernist writing.

Strong female characters

The women in the novel are examples of modernist characters, they are strong and independent. The most important of them being Clara Dawes. She is a suffragette and against the existing social standards. She walks with 'another man', i.e., Paul who is not her husband and does not regret it as she is rebelling against social norms. Clara has a dressing style which expresses her radical ideas and is not in accordance with society's expectations. She is not an appropriate woman according to society's norms. She is actively protesting and is politically active. Clara's character is important in Paul Morel's life because she has a major role in his sexual growth. Miriam does housework and because she has no opportunities, she expresses her frustration to Paul:

'I want to do something. I want a chance like anybody else. Why should I, because I
'am a girl be kept at home and not allowed to be anything? What chance *have* I?'
'Chance of what?'
'Of knowing anything-of learning, of doing anything. It's not fair, because I'm a
woman' (Lawrence 2015)

Here we can see that Miriam is aware of her being oppressed and discriminated. Clara has a feeling of solidarity and sisterhood for individual women like Miriam and she defends women when Paul complains that she asks too much of him demanding a spiritual communion. Annie (Paul Morel's sister) is also aware of women's position in society as she becomes a teacher.

Mrs. Morel is frustrated and rebellious. She is not submissive, expresses her dissatisfaction through anger and Mr. Morel is afraid of her in their fights. She does not leave the house because of her children and her hope is their being successful in life. She joins the women's guild where women gather to discuss about society. She resists violence inflicted on

her by Mr. Morel by being violent herself. When Mariam says she wants to become a man, Mrs. Morel says to her that females wanting to be a male are not comfortable with their sexuality and it is unnatural. Lawrence has tried to bring forward different aspects and multiple types of female experiences. By depicting his female characters as self-aware and who question the way society treats them, he positions himself as a modernist writer.

Breaking up of Conventions

In *Sons and Lovers*, D. H. Lawrence has challenged the prevailing conventions in literature as well as society. Walter Morel is not the reigning patriarch of the Morel family. He has been ousted from the family due to his drinking habits and violent mannerisms. His children dislike him and his wife is not under his control. Mrs. Morel is the real person controlling the Morel household. In this way the Victorian notion of the ideal family is challenged.

The concept of marriage as understood by the society of the time is also brought under scrutiny by Lawrence. The marriage of Walter Morel and Mrs. Morel is not successful, they have no love or liking for each other. Mrs. Morel remains married only for the sake of her children. William Morel the eldest son of Mrs. Morel, is not ready to get married with Lily Western but he thinks he has to because of the conventions set by the society. He is not able to understand what to do and this struggle ultimately takes his life. Paul Morel does not marry Miriam Leivers because she cannot give him sexual satisfaction. The only marriage that is shown in rather positive light is that of Miriam's parents. In this way the concept of marriage is shown to be deteriorating with the changing time.

The characters in the novel challenge the conventions set up for them by the society. Mrs. Morel is not the typical mother of the average household. She is very much aware of herself and is able to make decisions for the whole family. William and Paul Morel challenge the institution of marriage. Miriam and Clara question the treatment of women in the society.

Lawrence himself challenges the conventions of literature by writing *Sons and Lovers* in such a way that it does not fit entirely into any one of the prevailing genres. As is seen before, it is not an entirely realist novel, neither is it a *Künstlerroman* (a novel about an artist or writer) because the artistic side of Paul Morel is not the focus, it is secondary to his

emotional and sexual development. It is also not a *Bildungsroman* (a novel about growing up) since Paul Morel is not the only character on whom the novel pays attention. The novel is a combination of different genres and in itself is a new, refreshing break from conventions.

Conclusion

Sons and Lovers was written by D.H. Lawrence at a time when the modernist movement was in its early form and had yet not had a major impact on the English novel. Even then, Lawrence has tried to introduce new elements and ideas into *Sons and Lovers* while maintaining some elements of the 19th century realist tradition. The Modernist elements are more noticeable in the second part of the novel. Therefore, the novel can be seen as Lawrence's transition from Realism into Modernism. The concept of Modernism is more noticeable in Lawrence's later works.

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