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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Decoding Walter Morel- Class Politics in *Sons and Lovers*

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### Abstract

David Herbert Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) tells the story of the Morels— a working-class family. Lawrence has referred to *Sons and Lovers* as his 'colliery novel'. The present paper attempts to decode the class politics of the novel by closely focussing on Walter Morel, the chief working-class figure in the novel. The novel's narrative pivots around the domestic concerns of the Morel family, very often in which, Walter Morel, emerges as a villain and an oppressor of his wife and children. The text poignantly portrays domestic discord and the hardships that Gertrude Morel and her children face. However, it fails to delve into or elucidate

upon the underlying reasons for the emergence of these hardships in the first place. At the obvious level, Walter Morel seems to be demonised as a brute who causes his family continuous pain. However, it is imperative that the text is read within the larger social, economic, and political structures of its time, which significantly shaped and influenced the lives and action of Walter Morel and his family. This paper attempts to recuperate dispersed evidence from the margins of the novel to gainsay a superficial interpretation of Walter Morel as a mindless violent brute who is solely responsible for the trials and tribulations of the Morel family. It attempts to connect the dots between the representation of Walter Morel with the narrative's inclination towards the middle-class value system aspired to by the other members of his family, in order to, gain a more nuanced insight into the class politics of the novel.

**Keywords:** Working-class, Proletariat, Middle-class, *Sons and Lovers*, Class-Politics, Walter Morel, Gertrude Morel, Materialist-Criticism, Class Consciousness, Colliers

D.H. Lawrence hailed from a colliery background; his father Arthur John Lawrence was a miner in the Brinsley Colliery, his personal background coupled with the fact that the Morels in *Sons and Lovers* are a colliery family, may create a superficial impression of class consciousness that tilts in favor of the working class. A close scrutiny of the politics of the novel and of Walter Morel, a prominent working-class figure, in the novel is imperative to decode the class politics of the text. Jeremy Hawthorn in his essay 'Lawrence and the Working-Class Fiction' examines Lawrence's politics and questions whether his novels should be considered working class novel at all,

For many working-class writers the obtaining of a working-class readership was a political imperative: there is no evidence for such an imperative in Lawrence's writing. Indeed, from the evidence of a novel such as *The Trespassers* one can say that certainly early on in his writing career Lawrence appeared more clearly concerned to obtain a middle-class audience...The point to stress however is that the obtaining of a large working-class readership came too late in Lawrence's career significantly to affect his writing. (Hawthorn 69)

Lawrence grounds class reality in certain stereotypes, indicated prominently in his oft quoted letter to Edward Garnett (14<sup>th</sup>, November, 1912)– “A woman of character and refinement goes into the lower class and has no satisfaction in her own life.” (Ed. Boulton 476). The letter betrays Lawrence's hierarchical notions where the working class is the “lower” one and further implies people of “character and refinement” are perhaps not part of it. The novel's perception of the working class is indicated in its first description of the miner's where they imagery of “donkey's” and “ants” (pp. 5) are used for them, both of which are associated with physical industry and donkeys especially imply an absence of intellectual abilities. An important incident that gives first hints of the pro bourgeoisie class politics of the novel is the Walter and Gertrude's courtship episode. Where they are representative of their respective classes. Walter is viewed through Gertrude's bourgeoisie gaze and is assessed according to her middle-class ideals. No objective gaze is possible in a hierarchical society, the person gazed at is then

constructed and assessed by the person who initiates the gaze. Gertrude's gaze is focused on Walter Morel's physicality, he is described as, "ruddy", "black hair", "moist mouth", "vigorous black beard" (pp.12). In the same gaze Gertrude sees him as someone who is "soft" "non-intellectual", "comic grotesque" (pp.12). Another significant aspect of this incident is the coincidence of authoritative narratorial voice with that of Gertrude, something that recurs frequently in the text, especially during significant moments. Gertrude on the other had is described as his "opposite...had a curious receptive mind... loved ideas and was considered very intellectual" (pp.13). The word "opposite" is suggestive of a certain contradiction that exists between them, i.e., Walter's quality of mind is not as good as Gertrude and he is not intellectual. So therefore, when he does do the right thing, it's not due to his reasoning abilities but due to his impulses – "Not knowing what he (Walter) was doing, he often did the right thing by instinct..." (pp.14). So, at the very onset these two characters representatives of their respective classes are set up as opposites. In this polarity physicality and vitality is associated with the working class and the intellectual prowess with the middle class. The novel further undercuts the intellectual presence of the working class by representing them as whimsical, thoughtless, physical beings when compared to the intellectually inclined middle classes. The pro bourgeoisie class notions become especially prominent in the clashes between Walter and Gertrude. One such incident is cutting of William's hair where the "bloody battle" (pp.18) between the husband and wife is manifested on the child in an attempt to shape him according to their class and gender position. Gertrude preferred William's hair long in a feminine hair style, whereas, Walter asserted his gender and class identity by roughly chopping his hair and cropped him "like a sheep" (pp.19) which resonates with his masculine working-class image. In this clash Morel comes across as cowardly and thoughtless, who after the impulsive act "shrank back...bending his head to shield his eyes" (pp.19), whereas, Gertrude is in an impressive rage. In the novel Gertrude is frequently presented as the stronger of the two and steely resolve is associated with her bourgeoisie upbringing and tendencies, whereas, the working class is given to whims and is frightened. The class difference between them leads to strife and clashes in their married life and in this it is Walter Morel who is generally worsted.

The other working-class family in *Sons and Lovers* are the Leivers and the Dawes. The male members of the Leivers family are engaged in agricultural labour and Baxter Dawes is part of the industrial proletariat. The novel presents these members of the working class via the bourgeoisie gaze of the women in their family. Miriam who shares her mother's bourgeoisie aesthetics looks down on the male members of the family as "brutal louts" (pp.158) as they are unable to understand "mystical ideals", (pp.159) she and her mother holds dear. Similarly, Baxter Dawes is presented as a violent mindless hulk.

Intellectual disinterest and lack of appreciation for finer aesthetic is a charge that is frequently levelled at the various working-class members in *Sons and Lovers*, be it Walter Morel, Baxter Dawes or the Leivers, so much so, that it almost comes across as a characteristic of the class. However, the narrative never cares to delve into the cause of this apparent disinterest. It is not that the working class are uninterested in literary pursuit – Walter Morel makes the effort to read the newspaper. The possible reason for the lack of avid intellectual

inclination in the working class is the nature of their work and lack of availability of education for the working-class children. The precarious economic condition of the proletariat forced them to send their children to work at a very young age, for example, Walter Morel starts working at the young age of ten. The physically fatiguing nature of work ruled out the possibility of attending night school like Paul or William. The reason why Miriam's brothers cannot appreciate "mystical ideals" (pp.159) is because the intensive agricultural labor drains all their energy. Similarly, back breaking labour required in mining rules out the possibility of undertaking added educational activities. Furthermore, *Sons and Lovers* was written and published around the period of advanced industrialization of Britain, wherefore, the working class of the period were actively challenging the repressive ideals of the capitalist system. Terry Eagleton in his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction* challenges the depiction of working-class as intellectually inept—

Morel has what the novel takes to be characteristically proletarian inarticulateness, physicality and passivity. *Sons and Lovers* portrays miners as the creatures of the underworld who live the life of body rather than the mind. This is a curious portraiture, since in 1912, the year in which Lawrence finished the book the miners launched the biggest strike that Britain has ever seen...the developments with all their acute political awareness and complete organization, were not the actions of mindless hulks. (Eagleton, 152)

The narrative of the novel tends to be dismissive of the political stance of the workers and does not elucidate upon the activities of the trade unions who were seen as collective agents of social change. The significant strike that Eagleton mention gets inadequate mention in the text – “She kept her hold on life still. The miners had been out on a strike and returned a fortnight or so before Christmas. Minnie went upstairs with the feeding up” (pp.405). The worker's strike of 1912 is bracketed within the domestic concerns and its immense importance never elaborated on in the novel. The money that Mrs. Morel receives during Walter Morel's injury is the result of trade union activities, however, the novel does not elaborate upon the political significance of this instead it simply places it within the domestic concerns of the Morel household. Similarly significant scenes of proletarian collectivity and work life are inadequately presented in the text. A point Jeremy Hawthorn makes in his essay 'Lawrence and the Working-Class Fiction' makes' –

Morel's work down the pit is witnessed only through his retrospective stories and never directly in contrast to many other proletarian mining novel...The miner's powerful collectivity is witnessed in scenes such as the end of week paying wages but from alienated perspective of Paul and the origins of the collectivity in work process are invisible in the novel. (Hawthorn 75)

The negligent and superficial portrayal of the problems of the working class further throws into question the whether the politics of the novel is in favour of the working-class. The working condition of colliers were in a dreary state. The miners worked six days a week, twelve hours (at least) a day. The intensively exhaustive labour that the capitalist system demanded from its workers takes a toll on their domestic life. As seen in the case of the Morel household, the

physically straining nature of Walter Morel's work saps all vitality from him which then actively effects his participation and responses in the filial sphere – “The fact that his wife was ill, that he had another boy, was nothing to him at the moment, he was too tired” (pp.37). Rather than holding the oppressive capitalist machinery responsible for this supposed indifference, the fault is individualised. Morel's working conditions are hazardous; however, the narrative fails to adequately portray its dangerous nature. Miners were exposed to the double danger of toxic gas and the mine caving in. The novel never directly depicts the life threatening conditions of the mines and undermines the gravity of dangers the colliers are exposed to. The unhealthy working conditions induced “nasty peens” (pp.54) in Walter Morel's head, something which is dismissed, instead the narrative asserts that “Like all miners he was a great lover of medicines...” (pp.54). Rather than treating the frequent use of medicine as evidence of extremely unhealthy work conditions, the narrative dismisses this as working-class hypochondria. Furthermore, the narrative's unsympathetic portrayal of Walter Morel's accident indicates a certain bias against him and a failure to acknowledge and register the dangers miners faced at their workplace– “Morel was rather heedless man careless of danger. So, he has endless accidents” (pp.97). By attributing the responsibility of the accident to Walter the novel absolves the repressive capitalist system of the blame. The narrative voice never coincides with Walter Morel's voice. When he voices the sorry state of his working condition to the priest the narrative undercuts it as hankering for sympathy – “She hated her husband, because, whenever he had an audience, he whined and played for sympathy. William, sitting nursing the baby, hated him with a boy's hatred for false sentiments...” (pp.42). Morel does not concoct the miserable condition of his work; the narrative however plays it off as a cheap bid for pity. The novel never links Walter Morel's “exceeding” (pp.45) irritability with his oppressive work condition instead it attributes it to his temperament.

The novel holds Walter Morel responsible for the economic crisis of their family. However, there is evidence to counter this notion. Walter is one of the first workers to arrive “He always left the house at six, though the men were not turned down till about seven, and he had only half hours walk” (pp.33). He is also one of the last to leave “Morel was not as a rule one of the first to arrive at the bottom of the pit ready to come up” (pp.35). There is information that he is a good worker “Although he was very steady at work, his wages fell off. He was blab mouthed, a tongue wagger. Authority was hateful to him, therefore, he could only abuse the pit manager...consequently although Morel was a good miner...he came gradually to have worse and worse stalls, where the coal was thin and hard to get and unprofitable” (pp.20-21). Morel is not economically irresponsible he rations his expenditure according to his earnings “If he earned forty shillings, he kept ten, from thirty-five he kept five...from twenty he kept one and six...from sixteen he kept six pence” (pp.22). Instead, the novel never foregrounds these positive aspects, what is asserted is that “...he scarcely spared the children an extra penny...” (pp.22). The unhappy economic state of the Morel household is not Walter's fault, he earns less because he was not given proper pits and miners earned according to the amount of coal they turned out. Walter Morel's anti-authority, trade union tendencies make a target of capitalist displeasure, but the narrative voice endorses Gertrude's bourgeois opinion- “But, as



his wife said, it was his own fault” (pp.21) and reduces his questioning and critique of capitalist authority to an individual response.

Walter Morel gradually becomes estranged from his family as the children come to side with Gertrude and imbibe her bourgeoisie ideals. Paul’s blatant disregard exemplifies Morel’s alienation from his family “The father would come into the sick room. he was always very gentle if anyone was ill. But he disturbed the atmosphere for the boy” (pp.82) The Morel children are well aware of the hierarchical class structures. William takes pride in his mother for being “such a lady” (pp.8). Morel’s understanding of his alienation is that they have been indoctrinated into Gertrude’s middle class values, therefore, cannot empathize with their working-class father – “Why what have I done to the children I should like to know. But they are like yourself – you’ve put ‘em to your own tricks and nasty ways – you’ve learned ‘em in it you’ve” (pp.74). Class difference engenders difference in the social lifestyle of Walter and the rest of the family. Walter prefers to dine alone with a clasp knife instead of using a fork like his family- “With his family about, meals were never so pleasant” (pp. 32). Morel’s preferences are representative of colliery way of life and its rejection then becomes a rejection of the working-class lifestyle and values. Walter Morel’s working-class ideals are incompatible with his family’s bourgeoisie values, it’s this difference that is a major reason for a rift between him and his family and not that - “He had denied the God in him.” (pp.78). The narrative problematically reduces class difference into a moral-religious discourse which becomes the ideological justification of Morel’s alienation.

The “bloody battle” (pp.18) between Walter and Gertrude and his subsequent alienation from his family should eventually be attributed to the repressive capitalist structures. Sexual division of labor was a prominent aspect of capitalism, wherein, the female parent laboured in the domestic sphere and the male parent in the professional sphere. Due to this division one parent becomes responsible for emotional maintenance of the family and the other for economic maintenance. Morel’s nature of work ensures that he is away from his family for most part of the day, the fatiguing, harshly disciplined nature of work creates in him domestic irritability and violence. His absence and violence lead to his estrangement from his children who are emotionally drawn to Gertrude. Morel’s violence and irritability are a result of predatory capitalism, which creates repressive structure at work place that in turn adversely effects the domestic lives of its employees. Walter Morel’s alienation from his family drives him towards the public houses - “He was shut out from all family affairs. No one told him anything” (pp.78). Alcohol then becomes a refuge from repressive work conditions and dissatisfactory family life for working class men. Morel is not driven to these public houses because of his alcoholic tendencies, he goes there to seek companionship amongst his fellow miners who share his manner and misery and “take him in warmly” (pp. 50). The narrative holds Morel responsible for his alienation and gives a negative portrayal to miner’s collectivity by associating it with a pub and, Jerry, a particularly vile man. In spite frequent allusions to Morel’s alcoholic tendencies, he is not an alcoholic – “He drank rather heavily, though not more than many miners, and always beer, so that whilst his health was affected, it was never injured...He practically never had to miss work owing to his drinking” (pp.20). The structure

of the paragraph is such that it foregrounds the negative and only later proffers information that his drinking never harmed him significantly.

Though the novel foregrounds Walter Morel's negative qualities, it is possible to recuperate evidence to counter this dominant portrayal. The mining community was inherently patriarchal, there is some evidence that Walter did not completely conform to the authoritative patriarchal role – “He always made his own breakfast. Being a man who rose early and had plenty of time he did not, as some miners do, drag his wife out of bed at six o'clock” (pp.31). He mends his own pit trousers “...considering them too dirty, and the stuff too hard, for his wife to mend” (pp. 79). At the time of the birth of William he was “...good as gold.” (pp.17). He is sensitive and kind towards the ailing members of his family. These moments though sparse and dispersed within the text, give us a glimpse of Walter Morel's positive side, a side that the text mostly subdues. Besides this, Morel is a gifted person - “He had been a choir-boy with a beautiful voice, and had taken solos in Southwell cathedral” (pp. 22), and is also good at making things with his hands. These instances indicate the possibility that Paul inherited his artistic talent from him. However, the novel does not emphasize this, rather, it suggests that the children were like him when they erred – “Sometimes he (William) lapsed and was purely like his father” (pp.70). Walter does share some intimate moments with his family but these are few and far in the narrative and insignificant in comparison to the time that Gertrude spends with the children individually.

A materialist criticism of Walter Morel's representation in “Sons and Lovers” focusses on his class position in society. A psychoanalytical critique examines the psycho- sexual aspect of his rejection by his family. Terry Eagleton in his *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, makes an important point about the psychoanalytical approach towards *Sons and Lovers* “A psychoanalytical reading of the novel (*Sons and Lovers*), then, need not be an alternative to a social interpretation of it. We are speaking rather of two side or aspect of a single human relationship” (Eagleton, 153). So, a case can be made that a psychoanalytical reading of the text can work along with a social interpretation of the text by attempting to understand the underlying psychosexual reasons for the social choices that the characters make. *Sons and Lovers* has a strong reverberation of Sigmund Freud's Oedipus Complex. William, Paul and Arthur's resentment of their father can be seen to have roots in the Oedipal sexual love for their mother which resulted in jealousy and hatred of their father. Walter Morel failed to be the usual counterforce. This was supplemented by his absence and violence in the family life which drove the children closer to their mother and away from him and thereby leading to a failure to identify with his social class as well. Morel continues to be a target of his children's hatred even when they outgrow the Oedipal stage. This intense emotional proximity with their mother inclined the children towards their mother's bourgeois ideology over the working-class ideals of their father.

Lawrence referred to *Sons and Lovers* as his ‘colliery novel’, the politics of the novel however overwhelmingly favours the bourgeoisie class ideals. The novel focusses on Gertrude Morel and her children's bourgeois aspiration of “getting on”. The progress of the family is mapped in moving away from the working class— “The family was coming on. Only Morel

remained unchanged, or rather, lapsed slowly” (pp. 274). The novels bourgeois point of view endorses and identifies with the views of Gertrude and Paul. The novel’s ideology also remains alienated from the working-class ideals. It fails to give an elaborate and nuanced depiction to the issues and tribulations faced by the proletariats in their work space. Furthermore, a pro bourgeois stance prevents a positive portrayal of Walter Morel whose working-class ideals frequently contrasts and clash with the middle-class perspective of his family. The favourable representation of the bourgeois politics of the novel generally in opposition to the proletarian ideals raises questions about its status as a working-class novel.

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