

# SENSE AND SENSIBILITY IN SONS AND LOVERS

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*Sons and Lovers* tell the story of the Morel family, and in particular, of Paul Morel. Gertrude and Walter Morel live in a village in the north of England. Gertrude is clever and competent. Walter, her husband, an uneducated coalminer, drinks his money away and is often violent. Divided by class, the two do not understand each other, and Gertrude is bitterly unhappy. She devotes all her love and ambition to her four children. William, the eldest, prepares to marry a very superficial girl against his mother's wishes. Then tragedy occurs; he falls ill and dies. With William gone, Gertrude's love and hopes fall on Paul, who is talented and artistic. From now on the story concerns Paul's conflict between his love for his mother and his need to grow up and have sexual experience. Once on a holiday Paul and Gertrude visit to the farm of family friends, where Paul meets his first sweetheart Mariam Leievers, at first, Mariam means far less to Paul than do the other members of the Leivers family whom he visits frequently. Gertrude is jealous of Miriam, a girl he fancies and a tug of-war starts for Paul's love. Alfred Kuttner in *New Republic* says "A jealous conflict in which Paul is the helpless pawn, ensues between the two women."<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between Paul and Miriam is one of the central themes in *Sons and Lovers*, since it is through this relationship that Paul faces his issues regarding his mother's role in his life and women. Even though Clara, a married woman, a suffragette and later in the novel lover of Paul has an importance in Paul's physical and mental

development, but “there is little of the mother in Clara”<sup>2</sup> so Paul has no threat, guilt and difficulty for her mother in relationship with her. But it can be argued that Mrs. Morel, Paul and Miriam are somewhere rapid into a love triangle.

The fact that Miriam shares certain personality traits with Mrs. Morel is what leads to Mrs. Morel dislike of her. For instance, both women have a desire to love and take care of Paul in an overprotective and spiritual way. In Mrs. Morel case, her controlling attitude towards Paul is a result of Mr. Morel’s absence and the death of William, who was the object of her affection. Miriam’s love can be seen the same way as Mrs. Morel’s, that is, a spiritual type of love, since she is reluctant to have a physical relationship with Paul and is more centered in a platonic and intellectual area. The type of love that Miriam feels for Paul is clearly shown in the seventh chapter: “If she could be mistress of him in his weakness, take care of him, if he could depend on her, if she could, as it were, have him in her arms, how she would love him.”<sup>3</sup> Even though the idea of having Paul in her arms might suggest physical desire, in Miriam’s case it reflects her yearning to take care of Paul, like somebody that saves his life. Although she and Paul eventually have physical intimacy, she sees such intimacy as a sacrifice, something she must do in order to be with Paul.

One of the reasons why Mrs. Morel disapproves of Paul’s relationship with Miriam is the fact that she regards her as a rival. In other words, Mrs. Morel sees in Miriam somebody that can replace her role as a “mother” who is in control of Paul’s life. Mrs. Morel’s dislike is clearly shown in the remark she makes: “She [Miriam] is one of those who will want to suck a man’s soul out till he has none of it left.”<sup>4</sup> and further “the conflict between Mrs. Morel and Miriam for the possession of Paul now begins”<sup>5</sup> and Mrs. Morel cries: “She exults—she exults as she carries him off of me. She is not like an ordinary woman who can leave me my share in him.”<sup>5</sup> It can be argued that Paul’s soul belongs to Mrs. Morel which means that by sucking Paul’s soul out and carrying him off of Mrs. Morel, Miriam would be distancing Paul from her. Mrs. Morel sees Miriam as a competitor for Paul’s love. “Miriam is often seen as a bitter rival to Paul’s mother, the two predators fighting for the soul of their victim [Paul].”<sup>6</sup>

An interesting aspect present in the “triangle” formed by Paul, Mrs. Morel and Miriam, is the constant presence of Paul’s feeling of guilt and his mixed emotions

towards both women. Miriam's intensity constantly disturbs Paul, because he knows, unconsciously, that once Miriam's spirituality "trapped" him, she would be able to reach the depths of his soul, which is controlled by his mother. Paul loves Mariam and likes her companionship. As much as Paul appreciates both women in his life because they add positive aspects to his character, he is quite aware of the existing conflict between them; he knows that both women want him in the same way, spiritually and emotionally. He feels guilty because being in a relationship with Miriam hurt his mother and he also feels guilty by the way he treats Miriam at times. In other words, guilt is a common occurrence in Paul's life that affects him deeply throughout the novel, from when he is in a relationship with Miriam to when his mother falls ill. Such guilt comes mainly from his mixed emotions towards both women. Although he recognizes the importance of both women, mentioned earlier, he also hates them at times. His hate for Miriam is apparent on the eighth chapter when he criticizes Miriam: "You're always begging things to love you as if you were a beggar for love. Even the flowers, you have to fawn on them - You don't want to love - your eternal and abnormal craving is to be loved. You aren't positive, you're negative. You absorb, absorb, as if you must fill yourself up with love, because you've got a shortage somewhere."<sup>7</sup> Paul's hate for his mother, on the other hand is evident by his realization that Mrs. Morel controlled much of his life: "Sometimes he hated her, and pulled at her bondage. His life wanted to free itself of her. It was like a circle where life turned back on itself, and got no farther. She bore him, loved him, kept him, and his love turned back into her, so that he could not be free to go forward with his own life, really love another woman."<sup>8</sup> In other words, Paul becomes conscious that Mrs. Morel has influenced him deeply, to the point where it affects his relationships with other women. An interesting point in the novel is that Mrs. Morel is jealous and hates Mariam because she has fear that "Mariam might become the woman she herself wanted to be and married to a fellow aesthete and intellectual, achieve a happier marriage than her own."<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Morel who appears as a victim for not being in control of her life, later on in the novel she transforms from victim into perpetrator by not letting Paul be in control of *his* life.

The end of the novel represents a moment of epiphany or awakening. Paul realizes that much of his life has been controlled by Mrs. Morel and that his decisions and

actions have been shaped by her desires. Paul, as devastated as he is by his mother's death, understands that he needs to change: "He would not take that direction, to the darkness, to follow her."<sup>10</sup> Had he not changed his perspective in life, Mrs. Morel would still control him, even after her death. Paul's decision of not marrying Miriam in the end shows that he finally feels the need to break away and be in charge of his life. The novel ends on a note of ambiguity and possible presumption or assumption whether or not Paul will succeed in his attempt to be in control of his own life. The "triangle" is over, but the question remains: will Paul be able to take care of himself on his own?

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