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ISSN: 2278-9529



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Paul Morel: A Victim of Artistic Individuality in *Sons and Lovers*

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Since the day of publication, it has been a tendency to approach *Sons and Lovers* (1913) primarily as the story of a victim of 'Oedipus Complex'. The hero, Paul Morel, is very often looked upon, as the title suggests, merely as a son; not as a normal human being. Whatever problems crop up in the life of Paul Morel has been addressed as the reason of his 'mother-fixation'. Whenever someone strives to examine the character or personae of Paul Morel, the Oedipus complex looms large and everything else, if there is any, fades away. Because of this one-dimensional attitude, it is scarcely kept in mind that Paul Morel, besides his 'mother-fixation', does possess another identity no less important than his identity of a son; the identity that could be held equally responsible for his utter confusion and vulnerability: the identity of an artist. Yes, if being the son of an over-possessive mother cripples him from establishing a fruitful relationship in life, being an artist also allows him to do so. In fact, this single identity seems more responsible for not letting him to settle down to any particular relationship, but keeps moving throughout the novel.

In *Sons and Lovers*, the love of the three women figures - Mrs. Morel, Miriam and Clara has been defined by Mark Spilka as 'spiritual, Oedipus and possessive'¹. But, keeping in mind the artistic dimension, this could also be interpreted as static, inspiring and restorative. The love of Mrs. Morel, his mother, is static since it is the only solid relation in his life that provides Paul a kind of safety and security. After each of his adventures outside with the girls, he wants to come back to his mother. She stands out like a harbour where he could anchor his unstable soul. On the other hand, the love of Miriam serves to inspire his artistic soul; guide to artistic achievements. In the love of Clara, Paul finds a temporary abode to rejuvenate his exhausted soul.

The static love of his mother is the most crucial one; it provides a respite under its homely care and warmth. His mother gives him the life-force. "Hers was the strongest tie in life."² She is his spiritual goddess. He shares anything with her. Unfortunately, as time moves on, he finds that although the static love satisfies the soul of a loving son, it falls well short of satisfying the soul of an artist. The artist in his being is no longer willing to be satisfied remaining within the limited periphery of his mother. What he wishes now, is a greater sphere conducive to the blossoming of his artistic identity. Therefore, he rushes to his inspiring love of Miriam who gives him the much needed inspiration and recognition for his artistic venture. In the company of Miriam, Paul feels an essential intensity, which his mother is hardly able to rouse in him. "Paul is also drawn to Miriam", as also thinks Yudhishtar, "because of the intensity to which she rouses him; in contact with her he gains insight into his work, and his vision goes deeper."³ What Paul finds intangible to share with his mother easily shares with Miriam. Paul himself admits to his mother when she charges him:

.....why do you fly to her so often?"

"I do like to talk to her....."

"Not about the things we talk of. There's that you are not interested in...."

“You are old mother, and we are young.”⁴

This is the bitter reality of the relationship. Moreover, it “was not art that Mrs. Morel cared about, it was himself, and his achievements.”⁵ Nigel Messenger also aptly differentiates between the nature of the company of Mrs. Morel and Miriam:

“[T]he outer world seems associated with Miriam, while the safer and more familiar world of home and domestic routine belongs to Mrs. Morel.”⁶

However, though Paul becomes intimate with Miriam, he never intends to turn it into love in the real sense of the term. His love for Miriam is purely a spiritual one, devoid of any sensuality in it. The inability of Paul to come into physical contact with Miriam is often ascribed to his mother-fixation. Observing from the artistic perspective it may be suggested that the reason behind his inability is his artistic sensibility. Since Miriam serves to be the inspiration in his artistic necessity, he holds her in deep respect and admiration. She seems to be standing like a muse to him. He blatantly admits this to Miriam also:

“I can’t – cannot physically anymore than I can fly
up like a skylark”....
“Love you.”⁷

Even Paul himself tries to vindicate the nature of their relation; he admits the place of Miriam in his life and career. For the first time in the novel, Paul declares that he esteems Miriam as a ‘holy nun.’ He frankly tells Miriam: “See, You are a nun. I have given you what I would like to give a holy nun.”⁸

Apart from the static and inspiring love of his mother and Miriam, comes the restorative love of Clara. However, this relation also does not mature by the end. It has been suggested that while Miriam stands for ‘spirituality’, Clara is an embodiment of carnal desire. Looking from an artistic point of view, Clara seems to stand as a mystery and challenge to his artistic personae. In his first encounter with Clara, Paul felt “a sense of mystery about her life”,⁹ which he comprehended to be ‘exciting’. So, naturally the artist in Paul becomes irresistible to unveil that exciting mystery. Moreover, Paul discovers very soon, unlike Miriam, Clara was a defiantly straightforward woman. He also perceived that, in a conscious way, Clara was trying to ignore him by pretending to remain indifferent him. As a result, Paul felt somewhat determined to make her fall in line with him; particularly with his artistic self to win recognition from her. Later on, when Clara, after his friendship with Paul confides: “I seem to have been asleep all my life”,¹⁰ he strives to awake her from her deep slumber. In that way, Paul could usurp the role of a creator, which rightly suits his artistic ambition. Thus, his giving ‘funeral’ to Clara suggests his paying funeral to her deadness and thereby enlivening her real self. Besides, Paul’s so easily falling in love with Clara may be because of his perception that “.... she seems straightNot a bit deep”¹¹ utterly opposite to Miriam. Therefore, in his affair with Clara, Paul will be free from permanent commitment. He could be able to pull himself any time he wishes.

However, as Paul starts spending time with Clara, the sense of mystery gradually starts evaporating. Once the mystery is fully over, he finds nothing to keep his interest intact. In addition, as expected he becomes tired soon as his mother predicted earlier: “....but you’ll tire of her, my son, you know you will.”¹² Lawrence also comments:

[He] was an unreasonable child. He was like an infant which when has drunk its fill, throws away and smashes the cup."¹³

Paul eventually does this to Clara also. Once when he was so tired and worn out that he desperately needed someone to hold him up, Clara appeared like an angel who not only helped him restore himself, but also turned out to be a means to achieve his physical fulfillment, "a sort of baptism in the fire of passion."¹⁴ But once Paul achieves the fulfillment, he no longer wants to stick to this relation either. So, he complains to his mother, "she makes me tired, mother."¹⁵ He himself asks his mother, "...I love Clara better than Miriam. But why don't they hold me?"¹⁶ Then Paul himself provides the answer: "...but to give myself to them in marriage, I couldn't."¹⁷ In this context, Paul becomes one with Aaron Sisson in another novel of Lawrence- Aaron's Rod (1922). Aaron, like Paul Morel, also has the same nuances in his relation with his wife Lottie. Aaron, as his wife complains, "...always kept himself back, couldn't give himself."¹⁸ Aaron too, in a more defiant way admits: "I shall never love anybody else."¹⁹ Whereas Paul is unable to find out the origin of his inability, Aaron clearly points out: "I like being myself- I hate feeling and caring and being forced into it. I want to be left alone."²⁰

Therefore, marriage seems to be a prison for both the artists alike. So, it is not only the mother-fixation that Paul finds difficult to commit himself to marriage, but the very essence of an artist which also crippled Aaron, a married person with two children, to establish a happy, conjugal relationship. In fact, this artistic instinct of Paul Morel is only responsible to have his relationships hampered with Miriam and Clara.

However, after breaking off with Clara, Paul once again becomes restless to get back to the inspiring love of Miriam. Although he has been able to have a physical fulfillment in the company of Clara, for the artistic fulfillment he finds no one else to move to, but Miriam. The recognition and attention that Paul was able to attain from Miriam, finds impossible to derive from Clara. This time her being 'defiant' comes in the way. Lawrence explains:

Sometimes she praised his work; sometimes she was critical and cold.

"You are affected in that piece", she would say, and as there was an element of truth in her condemnation his blood boiled with anger.²¹

Naturally, the artist in Paul always remained hungry for support and inspiration, which Clara is not ready to offer blindly. As a result, his soul desires to fly back to the ever patronizing and encouraging company of Miriam. Therefore, he finally decides to return to her. Again, the artist in Paul stands in the way. It does not allow the lover in Paul to surrender to Miriam wholeheartedly. His going back to Miriam forever means the end of the freedom of his artistic being, which rather revolts in anger; he accuses Miriam of possessing such deep, spiritual love: "you love me so much, you want to put me in your pocket. I should die smothered."²² Nevertheless, as readers, we know that here in this speech Paul is only trying to defend himself against his inability to love anyone in the true sense of the term. This excuse only reminds us of Miriam's sharp reply to him: "I said you were only fourteen- you are only four."²³

Mrs. Morel is often held responsible for ushering in all terrible confusion in the life of her son i.e. Paul Morel. The general assumption is that it is out of her over-possessiveness that Paul cannot establish a successful relation in life. Again, keeping in mind his artistic individuality, it could also be inferred that Paul himself is responsible more than his possessive-mother: as he himself grows up into a youth it is his responsibility to distinguish between his filial love and the deep, passionate love of a man, which Paul hardly intends to do. Instead of that, he keeps surrendering to the demands of his mother. Although he loves Miriam; likes to talk to her, he always prefers, as he himself admits- "I want to come home to you."²⁴ Paul is well aware that so long he has the concrete and static love of his mother, he is free to sail out to the world outside; to have the alluring experiences and excitements as is necessary for his artistic being; and at the end of the day, return to the peaceful abode of his mother.

However, with the death of his mother, Paul loses the static love and turns out to be wretched and vulnerable person. With the loss of his mother, Paul suddenly finds himself all alone in the world with nobody to soothe his distress; his life becomes 'unsubstantial, shadowy'²⁵. Nevertheless, this is not that the appalling desolation arises merely out of the loss; another reason may be that since Paul has lost all of the three women figures, he finds no one to draw the inspiration from; the loss only renders him utterly at a loss. "Everything", as Lawrence explains, "seems gone smash, he had nowhere to go, nothing to do, nothing to say.... There was nowhere for him."²⁶ This was bound to happen, if not now somewhere later in life. Paul had to get rid of the old entanglements of relationships. He had to escape this older world to find out a new one; to establish a 'new relatedness'. His becoming so forlorn is not out of the death of his mother only, but as Lawrence himself explains:

Each time we strive to a new relation with anyone, or anything, it is bound to hurt somewhat..... it means the struggle with and displacing of old connexions, and this is never pleasant.²⁷

Even the world ahead is quite unknown, devoid of the warmth of his familiar women folks.

However, the present unknown opens up a new possibility for Paul and urges anew the creative artist in his being. In fact, before losing all of his beloveds, Paul successfully draws out the necessary vitality from them:

From his mother he drew the life warmth, the strength to produce; Miriam urged this warmth into intensity like a white light.²⁸

About Clara, it could be said in the words of Mark Spilka :

she adds to this life-warmth and creative vision the gift of manhood, the "baptism of fire in passion."²⁹

With the help of this vitality, Paul being at verge of extinction finally decides: "no, he would not give in,"³⁰ rather will continue to go on in life:

"You've got to keep alive,"

"You can go on with your painting."³¹

Finally, Paul forgetting all about his extinction, with great resilience, “walked towards the faintly humming, glowing town quickly.”³²

Therefore, from the above discussion it becomes quite clear how Paul Morel exploits his relation with either of his three women folks. It is himself or rather his artistic individuality being substantially responsible for the utter chaos not only in his life but in the lives of the women also. In fact, Paul will always do this so long the unstable artist resides in him. The artist in him will keep him leading into such violent criss-cross of emotion, ‘a tangled sort of hole.’³³ He cannot help it!

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