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Self-Sacrifice as a Substitute for
Self-Fulfillment in Sons and Lovers

"...And they lived happily ever after" seems to be the ending of almost every children's book. People are therefore conditioned from a very early age to expect, if not a happy ending, at least a working out of some of the problems of the main characters in the novels they read. And many authors, even very good ones, give the public what it expects. In a traditional chronological novel the major characters are usually shown going through different stages of growth and change, eventually culminating in some sort of self-fulfillment. But in David Herbert Lawrence's Sons and Lovers, while regarded as the most traditional of all of his novels, this is not the case. None of the four major characters, Paul, Mrs. Morel, Miriam or Clara, achieves any real self-fulfillment because each is too concerned with sacrificing himself for another person to develop and reach any major personal goals. Mrs. Morel refuses to accept death because she feels she hasn't really lived; she doesn't feel that her life has been full. Miriam and Clara each accomplish some intellectual goals, but each is still concerned mainly with self-sacrifice at the end of the novel. Paul is the only one of

the four to eventually reject self-sacrifice. After he finally rejects Clara, Miriam and his mother he is free to fulfill his own needs and concentrate on developing and reaching his own fulfillment.

Louis Fraiberg, as many Freudian critics of Lawrence, feels that Paul is incapable of freeing himself from his desire to sacrifice himself to his mother. In his essay, "The Unattainable Self: D. H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers," Fraiberg dismisses Paul's apparent rejection of his mother at the end of the novel as inconsistent with what has happened before and points to a lapse in Lawrence's artistic powers caused by "a split between Lawrence the man and Lawrence the writer"¹ as being responsible for this inconsistency. Daniel Weiss, another Freudian, disagrees with this interpretation of the ending. He points to the passage as evidence that Paul has started to overcome his Oedipal feeling: "In choosing the town Paul is accepting his father....Turning his back upon his home place he is rejecting, or at least modifying, his acceptance of the mother."² Paul's rejection of his mother, Miriam and Clara is viewed by Mary Freeman as evidence that Paul has turned away from death and self-sacrifice and will go on from there to "arrive at an acceptable resolution of his conflicts."³ John Stoll takes into account the ambiguity of the passage by interpreting Paul's turning toward the town as a tentative action instead of a final, completely positive one.⁴ While they may disagree on the interpretation of this final action of the novel, the critics agree that self-sacrifice is a destructive element, especially for Paul.

The theme of self-sacrifice is least evident in Clara Dawes, the last major character introduced in the novel. Before she meets Paul Clara is obviously trying to enrich her life and make it more satisfying and she does eventually find more fulfillment than Miriam or Mrs. Morel. She has left her husband because, as she says, "He never really mattered to me."⁵ She has also joined a women's rights group and educated herself a bit. Clara falls passionately in love with Paul and almost finds what she is searching for with him: "She had been there, but she had not gripped the--the something--she knew not what--which she was mad to have" (p. 431). Clara gradually realizes that Paul cannot give her what she wants but for some time she continues to submit to his passion. Finally she tells Paul that for her, passion is not enough and complains, "...you've never come near to me. You can't come out of yourself, you can't" (p. 441). In spite of this statement Clara feels in some way responsible for the failure of her relationship with Paul and because of this returns to her husband and a life of self-sacrifice: "She wanted now to be self-sacrificial. After all, she had failed to make Morel really love her. She was morally frightened. She wanted to do penance. So she kneeled to Dawes..." (p. 466). She turns to Dawes because she is sure of him as she never was of Paul, who she thinks "...would never make sure ground for any woman to stand on" (p. 494). Baxter Dawes loves and belongs to Clara but "as she looked at him lying there her heart did not warm with love" (p. 466). So Clara is back where she started, resigned now to a life of self-sacrifice with a man she doesn't really love and not expecting to achieve as

full and rewarding a life as she once hoped she might. Still, Clara is more satisfied than the other major characters: "She had learned a good deal--almost as much as she wanted to learn. Her cup had been full. It was still as full as she could carry" (p. 495).

While Clara chooses fairly realistic goals for herself and manages to reach a few of them, Miriam is a little too romantic and vague. She wants to be treated as something special. Miriam's self-image is the first indication that she will have difficulty finding fulfillment in her life: "She herself was something of a princess turned into a swine-girl in her own imagination" (p. 177). At least she does realize that "she could not be princess by wealth or standing. So she was mad to have learning whereon to pride herself" (p. 178). For this learning she turns to Paul, gradually relying more and more on him to make things come to life for her: "Anthropomorphic as she was, she stimulated him into appreciating things thus, and then they lived for her. She seemed to need things kindling in her imagination or in her soul before she felt she had them" (p. 184-85). An education is the one goal Miriam sets for herself and does reach; by the end of the novel she has enough education to become independent of her family.

Miriam falls in love with Paul but her love is a strange mixture of self-sacrifice and a desire to dominate, of adoration and condescension. When Paul first falls ill she thinks, "Then he was so ill, and she felt he would be weak. Then she would be

stronger than he. Then she could love him. 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 could love him!" (p. 178). This desire to dominate Paul is still evident at their last meeting in the novel: "She felt that now he lay at her mercy. If she could rise, take him, put her arms round him, and say, 'You are mine,' then he would leave himself to her" (p. 507). Throughout her relationship with Paul there are references to her feelings of self-sacrifice for him. The first instance is when she tells Paul to try the swing in the barn first: "Almost for the first time in her life she had the pleasure of giving up to a man, of spoiling him" (p. 186). Perhaps the most memorable is Miriam's decision to let Paul make love to her: "...she would submit, religiously, to the sacrifice" (p. 347). Her refusals to marry Paul when he tells her that he will marry her if she thinks they should marry are additional examples of her self-sacrifice. Miriam realizes that he simply feels "it would be his duty to marry" her (p. 337). and by refusing his offers she feels she is really doing what he wishes. She enjoys the self-sacrifice, prides herself on her humility and self-sacrifice: "Then she fell into that rapture of self-sacrifice, identifying herself with a God who was sacrificed, which gives to so many human souls the deepest bliss" (p. 212). Thus in placing Paul's needs and desires before her own she is actually saying, "Look at what a good and Christ-like person I am to suffer so much for

the one I love." The last time that Paul makes this offer Miriam again refuses, although she wants him very much. She cannot make the decision for him: "She could not take him and relieve him of the responsibility of himself. She could only sacrifice herself to him--sacrifice herself every day, gladly. And that he did not want" (p. 508). In The Dark Sun Graham Hough says that in this passage "Lawrence himself is forcing the blame on Miriam for refusing to live Paul's life for him."⁶ At last Miriam understands that Paul does not value her any more highly because she has sacrificed herself for him and that he will not come around to her. Miriam adores Paul for his intensity and his abilities and she feels in a way responsible for his talents. She says, "And she had discovered him, discovered in him a rare potentiality, discovered his loneliness" (p. 205). At the same time Miriam always feels superior to Paul, if only subconsciously. She does not think much of men in general and, while she regards Paul more highly than any other man, she still recognizes that this is a man. This condescending attitude comes out most clearly after Paul has made love to Miriam and then decides to break it off with her. She tells him he is a child and says, "It has been one long battle between us--you fighting away from me" (p. 362). Then even Paul becomes aware of this feeling: "She had hidden all her condemnation from him, had flattered him, and despised him" (p. 363) and "All these years she had treated him as if he were a hero, and thought of him secretly as an infant, a foolish child" (p. 364).

When she finally realizes that her sacrifice to him was in vain her condescending attitude pushes her tender thoughts of him to the back of her mind: "Her bitterness came surging up. Her sacrifice, then was useless. He lay there aloof, careless about her. Suddenly she saw again his lack of religion, his restless instability. He would destroy himself like a perverse child" (p. 509). He has brought life to her in the past and she feels that she cannot live with him "yet without him her life would trail on lifeless" (p. 509). Paul and Miriam leave his room together, "he talking, she feeling dead" (p. 509). She feels dead because her life, her fulfillment, consisted of sacrificing herself for him and now she knows he does not accept her sacrifice. But Miriam does not give up her feelings of self-sacrifice even then: "Well, she would wait and see how it turned out with him. When he had had enough he would give in and come to her" (p. 509).

Self-sacrifice also plays an important part in the life of Gertrude Morel, Paul's mother. In discussing "the pernicious effect of self-sacrifice in his book, The Forked Flame, H. M. Daleski says, "Mrs. Morel's married life is almost wholly self-sacrificial, involving as it does unwilling service of her husband, and despite her possessive love for Paul, abnegation of self for the sake of her children."⁷ Daleski goes on to describe her self-sacrifice as bordering "masochistically on the self-destructive" and cites the fact that she has hidden her tumor from everyone for so long as evidence.⁸

At first Gertrude is drawn to Walter Morel because she senses that he has something which she lacks: "...the dusky, golden softness of this man's sensuous flame of life, that flowed off his flesh like the flame from a candle, not baffled and gripped into incandescence by thought and spirit as her life was, seemed to her something wonderful, beyond her" (p. 18). But the high-minded, stern puritan in her gradually comes to despise her husband's emphasis on the physical and himself. When she fails to make him over into the kind of man she wants him to be, she loses her love for him and turns to her children then to provide her with some sort of fulfillment in life. As a young mother Mrs. Morel finds life pretty dismal: "The world seemed a dreary place, where nothing else would happen for her--at least until William grew up. But for herself, nothing but this dreary endurance--till the children grew up" (p. 12). As the children start to grow up they direct their actions towards making their mother happy and proud. They go out hunting berries and mushrooms to bring home some extra money for they know that will please her. William wins a glass anvil in a race and gives it to her: "The boy only ran for her....That was the first real tribute to herself. She took it like a queen" (p. 69). She takes the prize as a tribute to herself, not to William or his talents. This feeling increases as William grows to a young man: "She loved him so much! More than that she hoped in him so much. Almost she lived by him" (p. 73).

After William's death she develops this same feeling for Paul; she is more concerned about her own indirect fulfillment through him than in his own fulfillment: "She had a great belief in him, the more because he was unaware of his own powers. There was so much to come out of him. Life for her was rich with promise. She was to see herself fulfilled. Not for nothing had been her struggle" (p. 227). She takes on his accomplishments as her own. When Paul wins a first prize and twenty guineas for one of his paintings his mother says, "I knew we should do it!" (p. 309). Mrs. Morel thrives, not on his art, but on his achievement of recognition for it: "It was not his art Mrs. Morel cared about; it was himself and his achievement.

When Paul becomes interested in Miriam Mrs. Morel bitterly resents their relationship, even when it is quite innocent. She has rejected her husband in favor of her son and expects him to hold to her before all other women. Her love for Paul becomes more possessive and more explicitly sexual as she searches for fulfillment through him. David Cavitch says, in D. H. Lawrence and the New World, "Mrs. Morel misuses her son's affections, and her maternal character is complicated by her unwittingly seductive, unfair advances upon his emotion. Pathetically, her unfulfilled vitality is expressed through an increasingly sexual love for Paul, who all through the novel cherishes an image of Gertrude as a lovely, creative, and buoyantly self-possessed woman. But the reader perceives even more clearly than the author, whose

sympathy remains loyal to the mother, that Mrs. Morel becomes unprincipled and destructive in her jealous passion to keep Paul's love for herself."⁹ Ronald Draper, and many other critics of D. H. Lawrence, delves into Lawrence's personal history to explain the favorable attitude toward Mrs. Morel: "To be quite blunt about it Mrs. Morel is given oversympathetic treatment. The intense love that Lawrence felt for his own mother is probably responsible for a disquilibrium in a presentation of Paul's mother and father which is harmful to the main theme."¹⁰ Mrs. Morel's destructive love for Paul most obviously displayed in the scene following the burning of the bread. Here Paul and Mrs. Morel treat each other almost as true physical lovers:

"'And I've never--you know, Paul--I've never had a husband--not really--'

He stroked his mother's hair, and his mouth was on her throat.

'And she exults so in taking you from me--she's not like ordinary girls.'

'Well, I don't love her, Mother,' he murmured, bowing his head and hiding his eyes on her shoulder in misery. His mother kissed him a long, fervent kiss.

'My boy!' she said, in a voice trembling with passionate love. Without knowing, he gently stroked her face." (p. 262).

When Mrs. Morel is dying she again speaks to Paul and he to her with the tenderness and intimacy of lovers. Now she rejects Walter quite openly and bitterly. While she is in terrible pain, Mrs. Morel does not wish to die. Her life has not been full so she is not ready to die yet. She was just beginning to find fulfillment with

her son and she does not want to leave him. Mary Freeman interprets the novel as describing the "shaping of men and women by money"¹¹ and says that "it was in his mother's reluctance to die that Paul saw the essential flaw in her view of life. Material ambition and stoicism lost their virtue in a hopeless fight with death."¹²

From the time Paul is a young child he senses his mother's lack of fulfillment and wishes to fill that gap in her life: "When she was quiet, so, she looked brave and rich with life, but as if she had been done out of her rights. It hurt the boy keenly, this feeling about her that she had never had her life's fulfillment; and his own incapability to make up to her hurt him with a sense of impotence, yet made him patiently dogged inside. It was his childish aim" (p. 85). Several times in the novel it is mentioned that all Paul really wants out of life is a nice home where he can live with his mother happily ever after--without his father around. The first statement made about this dream is made when Paul is only fourteen, the last, not long before his mother falls ill. His plans for the future have not changed in over ten years and are still concerned more with fulfilling his mother's needs than his own.

While Paul's feeling of self-sacrifice are strongest with his mother, they do play a part in his relationships with both Miriam and Clara. After Paul sees Clara's home "he experienced a thrill of joy, thinking she might need his help. She seemed denied and deprived of so much" (p. 320) and so he helps her to get her job back at Jordan's. The theatre scene also points out his occasional

self-sacrificial attitude toward Clara. He loses his own identity in the heavy sensuality of her body: "He was Clara's white, heavy arms, her throat, her moving bosom. That seemed to be himself. Then away somewhere the play went on, and he was identified with that also. There was no himself" (p. 403). Paul's sacrifice with Miriam is more spiritual than physical. It is the communion Miriam is constantly seeking with him, but it is destructive for Paul. After their communion over the wild rose bush Miriam comes away satisfied, but Paul feels "anxious and imprisoned" (p. 198). And yet he is drawn back to her again and again: "And now he asked her to look at this garden, wanting the contact with her again" (p. 205). In The Forked Flame Daleski points out the narcotic effect of this relationship: "Paul comes to crave Miriam's stimulation but it is artificially restricted and lacks a healthy physical counterbalance to its dizzy intensity."¹³

Paul, unlike the women in his life, fights against his own desires for self-sacrifice and against those who try to sacrifice themselves for him. Daleski states that "Mrs. Morel is the embodiment of a principle which Lawrence fought against all his life and in refusing to sacrifice himself to her, Paul repudiates a great deal of what she stands for. Nor is Paul's fight against self-sacrifice confined to his relations with his mother; it is also at the heart of his conflict with Miriam."¹⁴ Paul returns Clara to her husband when it becomes evident that "She wanted now to be self-sacrificial" (p. 466). Daleski says that both Clara and Miriam "ineffectually attempt to 'soothe' him by sacrificing themselves."¹⁵ When Paul

rejects Miriam for the last time he almost gives in and gives his burden to her. Again he asks her to make the choice and she refuses him. Paul feels guilty about not marrying Miriam but he realizes that he could not live with her: "He felt, in leaving her, he was defrauding her of life. But he knew that, in staying, stifling the inner, desperate man, he was denying his own life and he did not hope to give life to her by denying his own" (p. 508). John Stoll sees the final rejection of Miriam as positive step for both Paul and Lawrence: "While he does not clearly enough perceive the reason for Paul Morel's final casting off of Miriam, Lawrence for the first time does come to grips with the problem of self. The known self is encountered, the self-division admitted, the causes-- as far as understood--duly noted, and the struggle begun for dealing rationally with the past as a means of finding hope for the future through the pursuit of a new and undiscovered personality."¹⁶ While some Freudian critics claim that Lawrence's mercy-killing of his mother is not a rejection of her at all. John Edward Hardy says that "Paul must kill his mother, before it is too late--that is before the radical dependence of his will upon her which he realizes, is irrevocably fixed by her death. Only, now, in the literal sense of the word, in preventing the natural death, in murdering her, can he assert his will, avail himself of the last chance to deny that his love for her has been self-destructive; and so preserve the idea of her goodness."¹⁷ But it seems more likely that the mercy killing is at least in part an attempt to escape from

his mother's stifling love. Paul does at times realize the burden of her love for him. While he is having the affair with Clara he says, "he felt he had to conceal something from her, and it irked him. There was a certain silence between them, and he felt he had, in that silence, to defend himself against her; he felt condemned by her. Then 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" (419-20). After his mother's death Paul considers death several times but there is always some spark that keeps him going: "He would not admit that he wanted to die, to have done. He would not own that life had beaten him, or that death had beaten him" (p. 501). Freeman points out that in the last scene, even when he feels dwarfed by the immensity of the dark night skies,¹⁸ Paul "could not be extinct" (p. 510) and "himself, infinitesimal, at the core a nothingness, and yet not nothing" (p. 510). These are the statements that make Paul's final rejection of his mother plausible.

Paul's final rejection of self-sacrifice as a substitute for self-fulfillment is indicative of what Draper describes as a "general refusal in Sons and Lovers to retreat from tough realities into attitudes of romantic escape."¹⁹ Now Paul is free to develop and attain his own goals for self-fulfillment. David Cavitch feels

that to survive Paul "will need to identify with a man, or else to seek a man's love effeminately."²⁰ The latter seems unnecessary in this case because he has someone that he can, and unconsciously does, identify with. Walter Morel, while not a strong character, does exemplify a man who lives for self-fulfillment and not self-sacrifice. Daleski says "Walter Morel is the only one who doggedly pursues his own way, neither sacrificing himself for others nor expecting them to sacrifice themselves for him."²¹ Dorothy Van Ghent goes even further to say, "In Sons and Lovers, only in Morel himself, brutalized and spiritually maimed as he is, does the germ of selfhood remain intact; and--this is the correlative proposition in Lawrence--in him only does the biological life force have simple, unequivocal assertion."²² For Paul to succeed in life he must identify with his father or someone like him who believes in self-fulfillment instead of self-sacrifice.

And so the novel ends with one character asserting himself to at least attempt to achieve self-fulfillment. The three women who could not leave self-sacrifice are at the end dead, feeling dead or only semi-conscious while Paul has found a chance to live a full life.

Footnotes

- ¹ Louis Fraiberg, "The Unattainable Self: D. H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers," Twelve Original Essays on Great English Novels, ed. Charles Shapiro (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1960) p. 199.
- ² Daniel A. Weiss, Cedipus in Nottingham: D. H. Lawrence (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962), p. 66.
- ³ Mary Freeman, D. H. Lawrence: A Basic Study of His Ideas, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1955), p. 19.
- ⁴ John E. Stoll, The Novels of D. H. Lawrence: A Search for Integration, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1971), p. 81.
- ⁵ David Herbert Lawrence, Sons and Lovers, 1913 rpt. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 335. (All further notes from this edition will be cited in the text.)
- ⁶ Graham Hough, The Dark Sun, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957), p. 51.
- ⁷ Herman M. Daleski, The Forked Flame, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), p. 59.
- ⁹ David Cavitch, D. H. Lawrence and the New World, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 23.
- ⁸ Daleski, p. 59.
- ¹⁰ Ronald P. Draper, D. H. Lawrence, (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 43.
- ¹¹ Freeman, p. 9.
- ¹² Freeman, p. 17.
- ¹³ Daleski, p. 66.
- ¹⁴ Daleski, pp. 59-60.

- 15 Daleski, p. 73.
- 16 Stoll, Search, p. 14.
- 17 John Edward Hardy, "Sons and Lovers: The Artist as Savior," Man in the Modern Novel, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964), p. 63.
- 18 Freeman, p. 19.
- 19 Draper, p. 49.
- 20 Cavitch, p. 29.
- 21 Daleski, p. 60.
- 22 Dorothy Van Ghent, "On Sons and Lovers," D. H. Lawrence: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Mark Spilka, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 21.

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