Sons and Lovers

D. H. Lawrence

About the author

*Sons and Lovers* is highly autobiographical. Like Paul Morel, Lawrence was the younger son of a mining family. He and his mother, Lydia, were very close, and his father was violent. Lydia married beneath her and the marriage was unhappy. At sixteen Lawrence met a girl called Jessie Chambers, who was the model for Miriam. Like Paul, Lawrence worked in a surgical goods factory. He then trained to be a schoolteacher. Like Paul, Lawrence left home at twenty-three. His first novel, *The White Peacock*, was published in 1911; his mother died of cancer in 1910. With her death, the parallels end.

Lawrence's health was bad and he had to give up teaching. In 1912 he met a German woman, Frieda Weekley, who left her husband and three children to live with him. During the First World War, Lawrence formed many important friendships in artistic and literary circles. He was unable to fight, due to ill health. Lawrence published his third novel, *The Rainbow*, in 1915. It was declared obscene and suppressed. He completed *Women in Love* in 1916 but could not find a publisher until 1920, when it was published privately in New York. However, in 1920, his novel, *The Lost Girl*, won the James Tait Memorial Prize. After the war, Lawrence travelled constantly, all over the world. He wrote poetry, short stories, essays, travel books, as well as the following novels: *Aaron's Rod*, *Kangaroo* and *The Plumed Serpent*. The novelist's health was very poor and he was constantly in need of money; his relationship with Frieda was stormy. Yet he continued to pour out work at an astonishing rate. In 1925 Lawrence returned to England. He was dying of tuberculosis, yet he worked hard to produce his last novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. It was privately printed in Italy in 1928. Lawrence died in the south of France at the age of forty-four.

Summary

*Sons and Lovers* tells 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. Gertrude is jealous of Miriam, a girl he fancies and a tug-of-war starts for Paul's love. Time passes. He longs to leave home but feels he cannot leave his mother. Eventually he sleeps with Miriam but the relationship fails. Paul embarks on another relationship with a more earthly woman: Clara. With her he discovers 'the enormous power of passion'. But he realises Clara is not his soul mate. Meanwhile, Gertrude dies of cancer. With his mother gone, Paul, now twenty-three, is grief-stricken. He feels a strong pull towards death. But the life urge in him proves stronger and he sets off to begin life anew.

Chapter 1: Gertrude soon discovers that her husband is not the pleasant young man she met at a party when she was twenty-three. He has taken to drinking and staying late at the pub. Her first child, William, makes her life happier but her husband becomes jealous of the baby. By the time she is expecting her third baby there is only hatred between husband and wife.

Chapter 2: Once Paul is born, Mr Morel gets less and less tolerant with his wife and the children. One day, after yet another row with Gertrude, he is in such a rage that he prepares a bundle and leaves the house. However, he does not go far and is back in a few hours.

Chapter 3: Although the couple have stopped loving each other, there is peace at home and a fourth child is born. When William is thirteen, he gets a job and gets training to become a clerk. He is so good he first gets a job in Nottingham and then in London. William, a very ambitious boy, promises his mother he will be able to help her with money. Gertrude feels sad.
Chapter 4: Now that William lives in London, Gertrude spends most of her time with Paul. Mr Morel is ignored by the family and the only event which reunites them and makes them really happy is William's visit at Christmas.

Chapter 5: At the age of fourteen Paul gets his first job at a factory, where he works 12 hours a day. Meanwhile William writes from London, telling his mother about the busy social life he leads and about his new girl-friend. Gertrude is concerned about her eldest son's well-being.

Chapter 6: Arthur goes to Grammar School and spends only weekends at home, Annie becomes a teacher and William gets engaged but doesn't look very happy. Paul is not well either so Gertrude takes him out into the countryside. Some months later Gertrude is advised about William's illness. She rushes to London but he dies in her care. Paul falls seriously ill but recovers after a long time in bed.

Chapter 7: Paul makes friends with Miriam. He visits her home and teaches her Maths or meets her at the Bestwood Library. Gertrude doesn't quite agree with this relation.

Chapter 8: Paul's paintings win a prize in an exhibition. Paul meets Clara, who used to be married and works at Jordan's. He finds Miriam's company engaging until his mother, ill with a weak heart, voices her dislike of the girl. Morel turns violent on arriving home drunk and his wife faints.

Chapter 9: Annie marries Leonard but Paul says he will always stay with his mother, although he likes Clara. Paul breaks up with Miriam.

Chapter 10: Paul sells his first painting for twenty pounds and his mother is proud. Arthur marries Beatrice and settles down after a rough start. Paul gets to know Clara better. She encourages him to go to Miriam.

Chapter 11: Paul goes back to Miriam and they have passionate encounters, but he ends with a feeling of failure. He breaks off the relationship.

Chapter 12: Paul now turns to Clara. He takes her home to his mother for tea. Miriam sees her there and understands she has lost Paul. Mrs Morel likes Clara but knows her son will get tired of her.

Chapter 13: Paul meets Baxter Dawes in a pub and they nearly have a fight. This upsets Clara, who is in love with Paul. He admits that if he were rich, he would live with his mother in London. The two men meet again and after a fight, Paul is badly hurt and nursed by his mother.

Chapter 14: Mrs Morel falls seriously ill while spending some time at Annie's. She has a lump on her side and the doctor cannot operate on her because of her weak heart. Dawes is also ill in a hospital in Sheffield and Paul visits him regularly. Paul nurses Mrs Morel as she weakens and finally dies. She is buried next to William.

Chapter 15: Devastated after his mother's death, Paul considers his option. His relation with Clara is over: she is back with Dawes and settles in Sheffield. He proposes to Miriam, who refuses because she sees it is not what he really wants. He contemplates suicide but finally leaves for the city.

The original text

Sons and Lovers is one of the most famous English novels of the twentieth century. The original 1913 edition was heavily edited and about one tenth of the text was removed. Only in the 1992 edition by Cambridge University Press was the missing text restored.

Background and themes

D. H. Lawrence felt that society made people lifeless and unreal, and that the class system was pernicious. Lawrence believed in the 'life force', in Nature, its beauty and its power. He also believed passionately in man's natural instincts; he believed that sexual feeling between a man and woman was natural and should be celebrated. He was the first novelist in western culture to attempt to explore sexuality seriously and frankly.

Lawrence's writing was also revolutionary in that it stressed the importance of feelings. The plot was important for the light that it threw on the inner events in a character. All the themes described above are strongly present in Sons and Lovers. But it is perhaps most illuminating to read what Lawrence himself wrote about the book: 'A woman of character and refinement goes into the lower class and has no satisfaction in her own life … As her sons grow up, she selects them as lovers – first the eldest, then the second … 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 is a split. William gives himself to a superficial woman and his mother holds his soul. But the split kills him because he doesn't know where he is. (Paul) gets a woman who fights his mother for his soul (Miriam). The son loves the mother – all the sons hate
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and are jealous of the father … The son decides to leave his soul in his mother’s hands, and like his elder brother, go for passion (Clara). Then the split begins to tell again. But almost unconsciously, the mother realises what the matter is and begins to die. The son leaves his mistress, attends to his mother dying. He is left in the end naked of everything, with the drift towards death.’

Finally, when Lawrence says Mrs Morel selects her sons ‘as lovers’, he does not mean literally. He is not writing about incest, but about a powerful emotional connection. And although Lawrence talks about ‘the drift towards death’ the novel ends with Paul’s affirmation of ‘life’ – which was Lawrence’s creed.

Discussion activities

Before reading
1 Discuss: Ask students to read the information about Sons and Lovers in the Introduction. Give each student in the class a different sentence from the second and third paragraphs (‘Gertrude Morel is poor … Miriam and Clara’). Ask students to memorise their fact and then put their strip of paper away. Students then have ten minutes to collect and write down sentences from other students. They do this by asking each other what their facts are. Then, in pairs or groups, they try and piece together the sentences, if possible, in the right order.

2 Pair work: Ask the students to work in pairs. They read the information about Sons and Lovers in the Introduction and discuss the following: What do you think it is like, when all our mother’s ‘love and attention’ is directed towards you? What are the good things about this? What are the bad things? Then get them to share their views.

Chapters 1–3

While reading
3 Role play: (page 1) Ask students to play the role of Gertrude or Walter talking to a friend.

Student A: You are Gertrude/Walter. Talk to a friend of yours. Tell him/her what you liked about the young man/young girl you met at the Christmas party.

Student B: You are Gertrude’s/Walter’s friend. He/She tells you about a person he/she liked at the Christmas party.

4 Pair work: (page 2) Get students to work in pairs and discuss: What didn’t Gertrude know about Walter? Do you think she was sorry she had married him? Why?

5 Group work: (page 3) Get students to work in groups and discuss the following: Why do you think Morel cuts off William’s hair? And why is his wife so upset? Then get them to share their views.

6 Role play: (pages 5–6) Ask students to imagine this story happens in the twenty-first century. Get them to imagine the conversation between Gertrude and her lawyer when she explains why she wants to get divorced.

7 Write: (page 10) Get students to imagine Gertrude keeps a diary. Ask them to write about life at home now that she has become more tolerant of her husband.

8 Discuss: (pages 10–11) Ask students to discuss the following: Who do you think William resembles most, his father or his mother? Say why you think this. Why do you think William does so well at everything?

9 Pair work: (page 11) Get students to work in pairs and to speculate why Gertrude feels so desperate when William gets a job in London. Then get them to share their views.

After reading

10 Pair work: Put students into pairs. Get them to discuss the following questions: How do you feel as you read about the problems in the Morel’s marriage? How do you feel towards Walter Morel? How do you feel towards Gertrude Morel? What advice would you give to them both? Write your advice down.

11 Discuss: Get students to answer the following questions: Would you describe Walter Morel as a bad man? Say why/why not.

12 Debate: Ask students to debate about the question of whether men and women had equal rights in the time when Sons and Lovers is set.

Chapters 4–5

Before reading

13 Discuss: Ask students to discuss the following: What will life be like at the Morel’s now that William is in London?

While reading

14 Group work: (page 12) Get the students to work in groups. Ask them to discuss the following: In what ways does Morel become an ‘outsider’ to his family? How does this make him feel? Then get them to share their views.

15 Write: (page 14) William writes to his mother regularly once a week telling her all his doings in London. Ask students to imagine they are William and to write Gertrude to tell her how well he is doing in London.

16 Role play: Gertrude and her children (Annie, Paul and Arthur) want that Christmas to be special. Get students to work in groups of four and role play the conversation when they are planning the preparations.

17 Discuss: (pages 14–16) When William came home for Christmas he looked around and said ‘Everything’s just as it was’. Ask students why the rest of his family remained still after his comment. What did they expect to hear?
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18 **Role play:** (page 20) Get students to play the role of Paul and his mother when he told her the happenings of his first day at work at the factory.

**After reading**

19 **Pair work:** Put students into pairs. Get them to discuss the following: Describe Paul’s relationship with his mother. Find two phrases in the chapters that show how close they are.

20 **Pair work:** Put students into pairs. They discuss the following questions: Do you think that Sons and Lovers, so far, is a realistic book? Do you think it shows how life was in a coalminer’s family in the early twentieth century? Do you like the book so far? Say why/why not. Then get them to share their views.

**Chapters 6–7**

**Before reading**

21 **Predict:** Ask students to predict what will happen next: What do you think will happen to William in the next chapters?

**While reading**

22 **Discuss:** (pages 21 and 23) William invited his girlfriend to spend Christmas at the Morels’. Why did he ask his mother to forgive Gyp? What worried William?

23 **Discuss:** (page 25) Paul made a big effort to recover from his illness. Get students to discuss whether he did this for himself or for his mother. What would have become of Gertrude if Paul had also died?

**After reading**

24 **Discuss:** Ask students to answer the following questions: Why was Gertrude worried William would do the wrong thing marrying Lily Western? Was she jealous or truly concerned about her son’s future life?

25 **Discuss:** Get the students to explain this sentence: ‘Mrs Morel’s life now fixed itself on Paul.’ Do you think it is good that Mrs Morel does this?

**Chapters 8–9**

**Before reading**

26 **Discuss:** Ask students to discuss this: What advice would you give Paul about his idea of physical love? Then get them to share their views.

**While reading**

27 **Discuss:** (page 38) Paul says ‘You’ll find you’re always falling over the things you’ve put behind you.’ Can this refer to his own life? How so?

**After reading**

28 **Write:** Ask students to write Paul’s letter to Miriam telling her their relationship has ended. Then they exchange letters and they pretend to be Miriam reading it. What does she say?

**Chapters 10–11**

**Before reading**

29 **Discuss:** Ask students in groups to think of the following: What can Miriam do to get Paul back? Then have a class discussion.

**While reading**

30 **Discuss:** (after page 42) Mrs Morel’s words to Arthur had the desired effect but they were not sweet or loving. What other advice could be good and kind at the same time?

31 **Discuss:** (page 46) Paul says ‘I’ll come home when I like. I’m old enough!’ How old is ‘old enough’ to do this? What about the duty and responsibilities that come with age? Is it the same nowadays?

32 **Pair work:** (after Chapter 10) In pairs, students answer the following questions. Then have a whole class discussion.

- a What kind of woman do you think would be the best partner for Paul? Write a description of her.
- b Do you think Mrs Morel would like this woman? Say why/why not.

**After reading**

33 **Discuss:** Paul asked Miriam to marry him but she refused, saying they were too young. Ask students to discuss these questions: Is there a right age to get married? Does this change with time? How so? How old were they when they got married? Or how old would they like to be when they get married?

34 **Write:** Ask students in pairs to think about the following: Why does Paul leave Miriam? Do you think he is cruel to her? Give reasons. Then they write a letter to Paul expressing their views.

**Chapters 12–13**

**Before reading**

35 **Predict:** Ask students to predict what will happen between Paul and the women he knows. Will Clara take Miriam’s place? Why (not)?

**While reading**

36 **Guess:** Ask students to speculate about the following: Do you think Mrs Morel is right? Will Paul ‘get tired’ of Clara? Say why/why not.

37 **Discuss:** Ask students to discuss the following: What is Paul looking for in Clara: love or just passion? Ask them to justify their answers. Then they check on page 55.

38 **Write:** (after Chapter 12) Paul goes to bed, confused and angry. Students write an entry in Paul’s imaginary diary about the events that day and how he feels.

39 **Guess:** (page 54) The text reads It seemed to him that he met a pair of brown eyes full of hate as they made their way out of the theatre but he did not know whose eyes they were. Ask students in pairs to guess whose eyes they were and why they might be angry. Then they compare answers.
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40 Discuss: (page 55) Paul says that if he had a lot of money he would live in a pretty house in London with his mother. Ask students to comment on his plan: Is it like him to have such a wish? How might Clara feel on hearing that answer? Why?

41 Group work: (page 55) Divide students into small groups and assign a character to each group. Then ask them to decide what their character would do if he/she made a lot of money. They say the wish out loud and the rest guess what character they are speaking for.

42 Read carefully: Ask students to read the last large paragraph on page 55. Then ask them to underline the words that refer to emotions. Do they mean love?

After reading

43 Pair work: Put students into pairs. They answer the following questions. Then have a whole class discussion on the subject.
   a What qualities should a good mother have?
   b Mrs Morel does a lot for her sons although she is weak. Do you think Mrs Morel is a good mother? Say why/why not.

Chapters 14–15

Before reading

44 Predict: Ask students to work in pairs. They read the titles of the last chapters and try to anticipate the end of the novel.

While reading

45 Pair work: (page 59) Mrs Morel says the journey does not have anything to do with her illness. What has, then? Ask students to list the problems and difficulties in her life that might have made her ill.

46 Role play: (page 61) The text reads Mrs Morel was, if anything rather worse, but she wanted to go home. Ask students to think of good reasons she might give her children to persuade them to take her home. Then ask them to role play the conversation in small groups.

47 Discuss: In pairs, students discuss the following questions.
   a How do you feel about the death of Mrs Morel? Can you explain your feelings?
   b What kind of life do you think Paul will go on to have? Do you think he will find the right woman for him?

48 Pair work: (after Chapter 14) Explain to students that in some cultures it is usual for people to bury their dead and engrave the name and dates of birth and death in a tombstone. Ask students in pairs to make up a phrase for Mrs Morel’s tombstone.

After reading

49 Check: Ask students to go back to their predictions. This time pairs exchange their passages. In turn, each pair comments on the prediction they had to read and say how it relates to the real ending of the novel.

50 Discuss: Paul does not marry Miriam although she asks him to. Ask students to think of the following questions in small groups:
   Do you think he made the right decision? Will he ever marry? What will his life be like in the city? Then ask them to share their opinions with the rest of the class.

Extra activities

51 Discuss: Get the students to discuss the following questions. Imagine that Mrs Morel had not died. What would happen to Paul, do you think? Do you think his life would be very different? Give reasons for your opinion.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.