Reading *Sons and Lovers*

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It is a truism that our sense of the "life" in a work of art seems often to have to do with our sense not only that what the work of art achieves is not the record of a triumph, say, but the exploration of a conflict, but also, and further, that the opposing forces or powers in it are being held not just in balance but in changing balance. It is no less true, but perhaps less a truism, that a special vividness can quicken this sense of "life" as we come to believe that in the work of art we have an account or record of conflict given not only *by* the artist but also, so to speak, *through* him; if nowadays we can no longer think comfortably in terms of daemons and Muses, we may nevertheless feel the need of metaphor to express our sense that a work of art, just as a child is the product of its parents but something new too, may be the creature of its artist but have not only a separate but an independent — *un*created, almost — nature and being.

Some such notions may come to the mind of a critical reader setting out on the opening paragraph of *Sons and Lovers.*

> "The Bottoms" succeeded to "Hell Row." Hell Row was a block of thatched, bulging cottages that stood by the brook-side on Greenhill Lane. There lived the colliers who worked in the little gin-pits two fields away. The brook ran under the alder-trees, scarcely soiled by these small mines, whose coal was drawn to the surface by donkeys that plodded wearily in a circle round a gin. And all over the countryside were these same pits, some of which had been worked in the time of Charles II, the few colliers and the donkeys burrowing down like ants into the earth, making queer mounds and little black places among the corn-fields and the meadows. And the cottages of these coalminers, in blocks and pairs here and there, together with odd farms and homes of the stockingers, straying over the parish, formed the village of Bestwood.[1]

With a name like "The Bottoms", you can't be quite thought to have won a victory over, even if you have succeeded to, "Hell Row." If things have improved, there is room for more improvement still, the balance is not settled. And if we take as a sign of life the wry jocundity with which the two names are displayed, in all their bare vulgarity (though "bottom" here refers, of course, to low-lying land, not to the human posterior), then the impression is not contradicted by the account we are given in the next sentence of Hell Row, an account that makes its name seem quite inappropriate; what is hellish

1 *Sons and Lovers* (1913: repr. 1948, London, Heinemann), p. 7. All subsequent page references are to the Heinemann reprint, 1948.

about "thatched" (not hard black slate, at least), "bulging" (not skinny and thin, at least, and perhaps even plump?), "cottages" (not shacks or cabins or huts, at least) standing "by the brook-side" (which is at least a natural stream of water) on (the quite Wordsworthian) "Greenhill Lane" is not immediately evident. And if we learn a little later that Hell Row was "notorious," that it had "acquired an evil reputation," then all we learn by way of justification of that reputation is that it was acquired "through growing old," which seems less of a sin as each day passes, but of course is not quite what you'd choose in a plumbing system or (which is probably more relevant to any consideration of Hell Row) a roof in the rain or a wall in the wind.

The only justification for spending any time thinking about Hell Row at all — apart from the interest that always attaches to the point where hammer and chisel cut that first chip out of the marble block, and apart from the little local puzzle of its name — is that homes are important in *Sons and Lovers*. One would not wish to re-title it *House and Garden*, quite, but it is in a deep way no accident that the first sentence of the novel is about an improvement in accommodation; the emphasis throughout the novel on the kitchens that life takes place in is something no reader could fail to notice, and each move to a new house is prominently recorded. It is no accident that the first passage of detailed description in the novel is of the Bottoms, and it is no accident that the first sentence we read about the first Morel mentioned is this:

> Mrs Morel was not anxious to move into the Bottoms, which was already twelve years old and on the downward path, when she descended to it from Bestwood. (p. 8)

I keep saying it is "no accident" because these references to homes are beads on a strong thread that runs through the whole novel; I have no way of telling whether or not Lawrence gave such attention to accommodation in these opening pages out of a conscious awareness of everything homes were to "mean" in his novel. Questions about a novelist's intentions are always otiose, if for no other reason than because what any mature adult knows about his own intentions, let alone anyone else's, is that he doesn't know much about them; but part of what I mean by saying these references are "no accident" is perhaps that there does seem to be something *un*conscious about them, that they do not give the impressions of being the product of an accidential or contingent intention, but rather the product of an interest or concern that Lawrence didn't make the book out of but rather made the book out of Lawrence.

And I suppose that to speak of such an "impression" is to respond to my sense that nowhere in these opening pages is there to be detected — in a novel heavily weighted with theories — any theory at all about the Bottoms and Hell Row; nothing in them betrays a "mental" origin.

It's history, indeed, that the opening paragraph seems to be providing us with, an account of what happened, not of what people thought, and not of what people thought had happened. It takes us as far back as to Charles II, thus locating this sort of mining in a decidedly pre-industrial past, where miners walk to work not down streets but across fields — as indeed Walter Morel still does — where mines are part not of the town but of the countryside, where they make "queer mounds," perhaps like the ones some insects or animals make, and "little black places," perhaps like the ones men make with fires, "among the corn-fields and the meadows." The miners' homes take their place amongst, not in distinction to, the farms and the homes of the handweaving stockingers. If nostalgic readers might find in this picture some corner of an ideal world, they should nevertheless keep it clear in their minds that *Sons and Lovers* is not offering it as an ideal; it comes to us neutral, as history, free (so far as anything ever is) of value-judgment. The word "queer" makes this as explicit as can be: "queer" here means "I don't quite know what to think (of the mounds)"; and "little black places" comes to us as uninterpreted clues noted from the site of a crime might. Perhaps it's because of this appearance of neutrality — in which the word "parish" is nearly, but not quite, merely a title deed or even geographical term — that the word "formed" so easily does its work of making a whole of what has come before.

The balance created — in the prose as in the history — between brook and pit is of course immediately to be disturbed.

> Then, some sixty years ago, a sudden change took place. The gin-pits were elbowed aside by the large mines of the financiers. The coal and iron field of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire was discovered. Carston, Waite and Co. appeared. Amid tremendous excitement, Lord Palmerston formally opened the company's first mine at Spinney Park, on the edge of Sherwood Forest. (p. 7)

What do we make of "elbowed?" What do we think of "financiers?" In the first paragraph there is work and difficulty — the donkeys plod wearily, and the men burrow like ants — but there is no elbowing of anything; things stand and live side by side, and the brook is "scarcely soiled" by the pit. There is a rough vigour in the "elbowed" — but it is an ugly rough vigour? Perhaps we simply have to wait and see. Are financiers ugly? Who knows? All the sentence perhaps allows us to

think about them is that they are gross, somehow; their mines are "large." Certainly the rest of this second paragraph speaks not of ugliness but of the thrills of discovery and new beginnings. Its excitement too comes to rest, finally, with not an invasion but a contiguity; the first mine is "at Spinney Park" (not in it), and "on the edge of Sherwood Forest" (so Robin Hood's undisturbed).

This impression of coexistence is reinforced by what we read soon about that symbol of industrial Britain, the railway:

> From Nuttall, high up on the sandstone among the woods, the railway ran, past the ruined priory of the Carthusians and past Robin Hood's Well, down to Spinney Park, then on to Minton, a large mine among corn-fields; from Minton across the farm-lands of the valleyside to Bunker's Hill, branching off there, and running north to Beggarlee and Selby, that looks over at Crich and the hills of Derbyshire; six mines like black studs of the countryside, linked by a loop of fine chain, the railway. (pp. 7-8)

But perhaps that is, as it were, the view from an aeroplane, from which everything looks pretty; reading about the Bottoms, we are presented with the contrast between the prettiness of the fronts and the ugliness of the backs, a contrast there is no apparent hope of making a whole of. The brook and the pit seem to have parted company; industrialism is making, in what was once a whole world, its own world, and that is the world in which men, women and children will now live:

> And between the rows, between the long lines of ash-pits, went the alley, where the children played and the women gossipped and the men smoked. So, the actual conditions of living in the Bottoms, that was so well built and that looked so nice, were quite unsavoury because people must live in the kitchen, and the kitchens opened on to that nasty alley of ash-pits (p. 8)

Sons and Lovers is quite decidedly about the separations industrialism makes. One could make out a case, I think, that the problems Paul and Miriam have with one another, if they cannot in a simple way be attributed to the consequences of industrialism, have their connections with the educational possibilities the towns that industrialism creates make available to the young Morels — and of course to Miriam — as they were not made available to Walter Morel. In the later parts of the book, indeed, Paul is constantly on the move between brook, as it were, and pit, books under his arm. When Paul becomes a kind of machine-world stockinger, at Jordan's, the pages fill with intimations of disease — Jordan's make, after all, *surgical* appliances — disorder and disaster. Mr Pappleworth's chlorodyne gum contains, one presumes, or is believed by the people who buy it to contain chloroform, morphia, tincture of Indian hemp, prussic acid, and other substances. Fanny is

a hunchback. Susan is forced into marriage by an unwanted pregnancy. In the midst of it all, Clara Dawes sits like a great Jersey cow tangled in a wire fence, or the princess locked in a tower because she married the frog; Paul has to take her back to beside the brook, the Trent, away from the pit, to make love to her. (But I suppose that's understandable enough.)

Mr Jordan, the authority figure with no natural authority, and Baxter Dawes, who has some kind — or is offered as having some kind — of natural authority — it is he, after all, who elbows Mr Jordan not only aside but right through the swing door and down the stairs — but is mostly either drunk or ill, both have their parts to play here, but it is significant of the achievement of the novel that Jordan's is by no means a *demonstration* of disease and disorder and disaster; it is a place where Fanny's beautiful hair reminds us of the natural flow of things, where the girls all sing together, unseparated, and it is in the complexity of the forces at work in the scenes, the shifting balances among them, that we find out experience of Jordan's, not in any simple diagrammatic or algebraic significance derivable or translatable from them. It's hard to believe that these passages of life at Jordan's are the product of Lawrence's analytic thinking — partly, perhaps, because though there is a great deal we can think about them, they do not reduce to thoughts, they cannot be summed up in views or ideas.

If, when we read of Paul looking for job advertisements that he was already a "prisoner of industrialism," it may occur to us that there is someone we have been reading about who is even more a prisoner. Mrs Morel is of course at the centre of the novel — her marriage begins it, and her death ends it — and she is the first individual the book singles out for us. And the first thing we learn about her is that she "was not anxious to move into the Bottoms." Mrs Morel has married beneath her, and more and more as the book proceeds finds her husband a disappointment. The first disappointment, appropriately enough, has to do with accommodation — she discovers that the house Walter has allowed her to believe he owns is in fact his mother's — and when we first meet her it is her middle-class concern for isolated security that we are put in touch with, the security of the separateness being in "your own home" gives:

> she had an end house in one of the top blocks, and thus had only one neighbour; on the other side an extra strip of garden. And, having an end house, she enjoyed a kind of aristocracy among the other women of the "between" houses, because her rent was five shillings and sixpence instead of five shillings a week. But this superiority of station was not much consolation to Mrs Morel. (p. 8)

It was not much consolation, of course, not only because she is pregnant, and shrinks a little from her first contact with "the Bottoms women;" it is not much consolation because her husband was a miner.

What exacerbates the divisions industrialism brings about in this society is, in the case of the Morels' private, domestic society, class difference. The chief surface evidence of this, of course, is in the languages members of the family speak. Walter Morel speaks a working-class language, and the rest of the family speak an educated middle-class language; and it is hard, sometimes, not to think of Walter's as the language of feeling and Mrs Morel's as the language of thought. Being the language of thought, it is the language of progress and success in the new world; William's letter, as well as Paul's knowledge of French, get Paul his job at Jordan's. (It is also, of course, the language in which novels are written, and that perhaps is one of the many reasons why Paul did well to cleave so to his mother.) Language opens up the way ahead:

> When the children were old enough to be left, Mrs Morel joined the Women's Guild. It was a little club of women attached to the Co-operative Wholesale Society, which met on Monday night in the long room over the grocery shop of the Bestwood "Co-op." The women were supposed to discuss the benefits to be derived from co-operation, and other social questions. Sometimes Mrs Morel read a paper. It seemed queer to the children to see their mother, who was always busy about the house, sitting writing in her rapid fashion, thinking, referring to books, and writing again. They felt for her on such occasions the deepest respect. (p. 60)

While the novel does not direct us to make the comparison, a reader may very well take the opportunity it offers him to think about the women at Jordan's in connection with Mrs Morel and her Women's Guild. The women who wish to improve things — and incidentally, we may very well ask ourselves if there is not in the sentence, "The women were supposed to discuss the benefits to be derived from co-operation, and other social questions," a faint ridiculing smile, suppressed only by the reverence the end of paragraph so good humouredly and generously gives — first of all have to leave their children — which of course it is perfectly understandable that they must do, but which the paragraph makes an opening point of, nevertheless, as a piece of music, which must be in *some* key, nevertheless sets off in a particular key — secondly, must work quite alone, in their heads, instead of being "busy about the house," and thirdly, create a division between themselves and their husbands:

> ...from off the basis of the Guild, the women could look at their homes, at the conditions of their own lives, and find fault. So the colliers found their women had a new standard of their own, rather disconcerting. (p. 61)

In her home, Mrs Morel seems often to be functioning as a little Women's Guild all of her own.

The girls at Jordan's seem different:

> ...below him (Paul) saw a room with windows round two sides, and at the farther end half a dozen girls sitting bending over the benches in the light from the window, sewing. They were singing together "Two Little Girls in Blue." Hearing the door opened, they all turned round, to see Mr. Pappleworth and Paul looking down on them from the far end of the room. They stopped singing. (p. 118)

What the language here emphasizes, quite forcefully, is the cohesiveness of the girls. If the ladies (as one must call them) at the Women's Guild also make a group, then it is a fact about them that the novel never bothers to realize for us; what is dramatized for us of the Women's Guild is not that it is a group, but that it makes for individual separateness. We are told that Women's Guild activities make for sexual division, and the lively confrontations between the Jordan's girls and Mr Pappleworth are dramatized; what they seem to have in common, that is, is merely thought about in connection with the Women's Guild, whereas it is seen in the life in connection with Jordan's.

In the community at Jordan's, however, there is one separate individual, Clara Dawes.

> During the ten years that she had belonged to the women's movement she had acquired a fair amount of education, and, having had some of Miriam's passion to be instructed, had taught herself French, and could read in that language with a struggle. She considered herself as a woman apart, and particularly apart, from her class. The girls in the spiral department were all of good homes. It was a small, special industry, and had a certain distinction. There was an air of refinement in both rooms. But Clara was aloof also from her fellow workers. (p. 283)

All the elements we have been picking up seem to be represented here. The women's movement, closely relating to the Guild, is there; education, and in particular education in a foreign language, is there; "good homes" and "industry" meet; middle-class "refinement" enters; and we are offered the image of a single, separate, *superior* individual. If we have here the loose net in which Paul and his mother, and Miriam, and Clara, hang together — we could perhaps even suggest that Miriam and her mother form a small amateur Women's Guild: they certainly feel quite separate from the Leivers men — then it has been on his mother's shoulders that Paul has stood to see where to go.

"I *do* like to talk to her — I never said I didn't. But I *don't* love her."
"Is there nobody else to talk to?"
"Not about the things we talk of. There's lots of things that you're not interested in, that —"
"What things?"
Mrs Morel was so intense that Paul began to pant.
"Why — painting — and books. *You* don't care about Herbert Spencer."
"No," was the sad reply. "And *you* won't at my age."
"Well, but I do now — and Miriam does —"
"And how do you know," Mrs Morel flashed defiantly, "that *I* shouldn't. Do you ever try me!" (p. 228)

From the vantage-point his mother established for him, Paul can peer into the distant lands of French and Herbert Spencer, and Miriam and Clara peer with him.

In its analysis of the process of industrialization, *Sons and Lovers* has much more to bring before us than even all this, more than Jordan's girls and the Guild and education, more even than French and Herbert Spencer; it has, for example, the story of William. It is immediately after the paragraphs devoted to the Guild that William's comet career is set in motion.

Then, when the lad was thirteen, she got him a job in the "Co-op." office. He was a very clever boy, frank, with rather rough features and real viking blue eyes.
"What does want ter ma'e a stool-harsed Jack on 'im for?" said Morel. "All he'll do is to wear his britches behind out, an' earn nowt. What's 'e startin'|wi'?"
"It doesn't matter what he's starting with," said Mrs Morel.
"It wouldna! Put 'im 'i th' pit wi' me, an e'll earn a easy ten shillin' a wik from th' start. But six shillin' wearin' his truck-end out on a stool's better than ten shillin' i' th' pit wi' me, I know."
"He is *not* going in the pit," said Mrs Morel, "and there's an end of it."
"It wor good enough for me, but it's non good enough for 'im." (p. 61)

It's no good asking if William would have been better off "i' th' pit" with his father — or, for that matter, if Paul would have, or even Miriam — but we can ask what not going down the mine brought him, and the answer is first Gyp and then death. Even Herbert Spencer is preferable, and if Paul managed to pull himself out of the "lapse towards death" only for that, he is even so decidedly better off than his brother. William, who like his father spent all day and his life's vigour at the Wakes, took a vigorous fling, as no one else in the novel does, at the world's goods, at the world in which even a woman is not much more than a good — a photograph, and scores of pairs of gloves — and found that what he had to pay for everything was everything. It's possible, even, that he died because he was alone,

separated off from family and home. In Gyp we have another instance of the sexual attractiveness of the middle class; William has fallen for the refinement his father fell for before him.

But Walter Morel not only does not go under, not only does not die; he survives them all — he nearly even survives Paul. Why? the language in which he criticizes his wife's determination to keep William out of the pit is, surely, part of what saves him. It preserves him in the world of the working class, saves him, for one thing, from earning the sort of money in the sorts of conditions that free William to try for the things that money in the city is invited by it to try for. His language, also, is a language of men; it is not even the language his mother speaks, which, like the snippets we hear from other working-class women in the novel, is not vivid, but only ill-educated. It is the women who — in *Sons and Lovers*, that is — are the sources of the desire for improvement, sources of dissatisfaction with the existing state of affairs; Walter, as his conversation about William's first job makes clear, seeks only continuance, not improvement.

But it is in the minor poetry of his speech, in the self-renewing vigour of it, that we find the evidence of what preserves him from the fate of William, from being made the creature of his wife. Love-talk in as late a novel as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* comes in a dialect like Walter's: that's often what is meant by calling it the language of feeling. But Walter makes it clear that there are more feelings than love; it is not love that he's talking, when he says William should go down the pit. Or is it? Love is certainly a good deal of what this novel, like most others, is about, and continuance is made possible, I suppose one must concede, by love. But we don't need quite such profundities to think with, looking at the speech of Walter Morel. The earthy, elbowing vigour of "stool-harsed" should make most of us stool-harsed Jacks writhe a little, at the spondaic punch in it first, and then at what force has done, which is to imagine us as having wooden bottoms, as being not fully human in that distinguished area, Pinocchios without the magic. All such a man wears out, Walter Morel implies, is not muscle but trousers. We hear another spondee hammer in "earn nowt," hear another rhetorical door slam, and perhaps respond to the belief that seems to be behind it, that it is part of a man's life to earn his way, rather than, say, to be paid for serving on a stool. And what goes along with these explosive phrases is the sinuous flow suggested in all the elisions. The vigour is not only blunt, but supple, too.

The concreteness of Walter's imagery — the "six shillin'," the "truck-end," the "stool," the "pit" — a continuing mark of his speech. Morel is the maker, and his wife is the thinker; if we think of him, we

very likely soon think of Taffy the donkey, or the mouse, of the fuses, or the coal-rake, or the white calico snap-bag, or the drops of fat he caught on his bread as he toasted his bacon on a fork. These are the things of his life, and of his speech. And it's in his life, not just in his talk or his ambitions, that these things coexist. Mrs Morel smells her flowers, and delights in them; Morel

> appeared at the pit-top, often with a stalk from the hedge between his teeth, which he chewed all day to keep his mouth moist, down the mine, feeling quite as happy as when he was in the field. (p. 35)

If the brook and the pit come together anywhere in the novel after the first few paragraphs, then probably it is in the life of Walter Morel that they do it.

There is a distinct danger, in this line of thinking about *Sons and Lovers*, of sentimentalizing or romanticizing Walter. A great deal can be said for the community of men — something like the equivalent of the girls at Jordan's — that Walter and his workmates create, but it finds its second home — after the pit — in the pub, and though we do not know enough about life in the pub — we know little more than Mrs Morel knows, indeed: she thinks about it for us — to be able to come to an informed conclusion about what it amounts to, there is no turning away from the drunkenness that seems ineradi-cable in it. How much less damaging it might have been to both of them had Walter lurched home to a less Congregationalist welcome than his wife gave him, it is impossible to say, of course; but there is no denying the power of such a passage as this:

> Having such a great space in front of the house gave the children a feeling of night, of vastness, and of terror. This terror came in from the shrieking of the tree and the anguish of the home discord. Often Paul would wake up, after he had been asleep a long time, aware of thuds downstairs. Instantly he was wide awake. Then he heard the booming shouts of his father, come home nearly drunk, then the sharp replies of his mother, then the bang, bang of his father's fist on the table, and the nasty snarling shout as the man's voice got higher. And then the whole was drowned in a piercing medley of shrieks and cries from the great, wind-swept ash-tree. The children lay silent in suspense, waiting for a lull in the wind to hear what their father was doing. He might hit their mother again. (p. 69)

The poetry of such a passage speaks most intensely of the plight of the Morel children. Placing them high up, in the world, as it were, of only time and space, not substance — that is down below, down where the powerful forces of the earth's movers are, one of whom actually comes from underground — high up amongst spirit-noises of the air but passive auditors still of the earthquake rumblings and thuds below, the passage dramatizes vividly the powerless isolation of the

children; that psychological damage may follow from the general vague impression they might build up that the passions of adulthood are inseparable from brutality is easy to understand.

The Walter who, through his wife or not, has this effect on his children cannot be sentimentalized out of existence in favour of the Walter who is so nice to Taffy. Part of the analysis of industrialism is to be found in the prominence the novel gives to the destructive consequences of alcoholism. We must remember, of course, as well, that it is not Walter who is destroyed; his drunkenness is not in any way the equivalent of Mrs Morel's cancer. If he is Lawrence's chief drunk, he is not the only hero (shall we say?) of Lawrence's to find that all his life needs cannot be found in a kitchen, and walk out of it, to find that the world of men and work is opposed by, not complemented by, wife and children and kitchen and garden. The men who manage it are the rather dull Leonard, colourless (though also not unmanly) Arthur, and Baxter Dawes. The men who don't are Paul and William and, to the degree that his marriage was not a success, Walter.

The lack of success of that marriage, however, is the success of the novel, many readers feel; the first six chapters — up to the chapter entitled "Lad-and-Girl Love" — are the novel's central achievement. It is after these chapters, of course, that Walter's appearances become much less frequent, and his spirit less evident. Speaking to Miriam on one occasion, Paul says, "I don't believe God knows such a lot about Himself. God doesn't *know* things, He *is* things. And I'm sure He's not soulful," and while it would be taking things rather far to substitute Walter's name there for God's — and of course nothing could be further from Paul's mind just then — it is perhaps in some such terms that one might find a way of summing Walter's importance up; and perhaps one could go further, and suggest that, in a general way, what is less satisfactory about Part II of the novel is that it is soulful in the constant presence of the adolescent Paul and Miriam, whose fairly constant interest is in (though the distinctions is a rough one) knowing as against being.

What Paul is seeking for himself through Part II is, perhaps, the wholeness of "being" as against the separateness of "knowing." The particular state of wholeness he's after is the state in which the spirit is made flesh, in which love is fulfilled, in which marriage (as holy and bodily made one) is consummated. All he achieves in the long run is the remaking of his parents' marriage in giving Baxter back to Clara — and it's not the other way round — and setting off, himself, for the town, after the death of his mother, to try again.

His difficulty is associated, in a central passage of diagnosis, with his parents'.

> A good many of the nicest men he knew were like himself, bound in by their own virginity, which they could not break out of. They were so sensitive to their women that they would go without them for ever rather than do them a hurt, an injustice. Being the sons of mothers whose husbands had blundered brutally through their feminine sanctities, they were themselves too diffident and shy. They could easier deny themselves than incur any reproach from a woman; for a woman was like their mother, and they were full of the sense of their mother. (p. 299)

Hey up, there! What's this about brutal blundering?

> She looked at him, startled. This was a new tract of life suddenly opened before her. She realized the life of the miners, hundreds of them toiling below earth and coming up at evening. He seemed to her noble. He risked his life daily, and with gaiety. She looked at him, with a touch of appeal in her pure humility.
>
> "Shouldn't ter like it?" he asked tenderly. "'Appen not, it 'ud dirty thee." She had never been "thee'd" and "thou'd" before.
>
> The next Christmas they were married, and for three months she was perfectly happy; for six months she was very happy. (p. 17)

Even Paul seems to know that.

> "Yes; but my mother, I believe, got *real* joy and satisfaction out of my father at first. I believe she had a passion for him; that's why she stayed with him. After all, they were bound to each other."
>
> "Yes," said Miriam.
>
> "That's what one *must have,* I think," he continued — "the real, real flame of feeling through another person — once, only once, if it only lasts three months. See, my mother looks as if she's *had* everything that was necessary for her living and developing. There's not a tiny bit of feeling of sterility about her."
>
> "No," said Miriam.
>
> "And with my father, at first, I'm sure she had the real thing. She knows; she has been there. You can feel it about her, and about him, and about hundreds of people you meet every day; and, once it has happened to you, you can go on with anything and ripen."
>
> "What has happened, exactly?" asked Miriam.
>
> "It's so hard to say, but the something big and intense that changes you when you really come together with somebody else. It almost seems to fertilize your soul and make it that you can go on and mature." (p. 338)

But Mrs Morel puts a scotch in the wheel, rather, when she tells Paul, whose mouth is on her throat (kissing it) and who a few moments later very overheatedly acts Hamlet to his Gertrude by telling her not to sleep with his father:

> "And I've never — you know, Paul — I've never had a husband — not really". (p. 229)

although earlier in the same chapter we have read this:

> "You should have seen him as a young man," she cried suddenly to Paul, drawing herself up to imitate her husband's once handsome bearing.
>
> Morel watched her shyly. He saw again the passion she had had for him. It blazed upon her for a moment. He was shy, rather scared, and humble. Yet again he felt his old glow. And then immediately he felt the ruin he had made during these years. He wanted to bustle about, to run away from it. (p. 213)

So what's the truth of the matter, if there is one? The first passage emerges from a longish piece of dramatized, reflective self-analysis in which Paul wonders why he is reluctant to be with Miriam, and decides that the obstacle lies in his shrinking from "physical contact." The passage refers to "the nicest men he knew," but are we to conclude from that that these general notions about "virginity" in young men are indeed Paul's notions? Who are these "nicest men?" Not prominent characters in *Sons and Lovers.* Whoever they are, how did whoever knew them — Paul or Lawrence — know that their fathers had "blundered rather brutally" through the "feminine sanctities" of their mothers? It sounds like the *last* thing a "nice" man would tell to even a close friend, and the last thing a mother who'd had "feminine sanctities" would tell a son.

And what are "feminine sanctities?" Little rooms all papered over with chintz doilies? Drawers filled with not legs but lavender? One is entitled to be disrespectful, I suggest, by what is implied in "they were so sensitive to their women that they would go without them for ever rather than do them a hurt, and injustice." "Their women" indeed! (for although "their" is not merely possessive, it has some of the crudeness of possessiveness in it). "Go without them" indeed! (as if "their women" were a tempting chocolate pudding, as if their "feminine sanctities" were all there was to "them"). "Rather than do them a hurt" indeed! (as if this whole way of thinking were not itself a "hurt," and "injustice," as if to "go without them" were not itself a "hurt").

This is a piece of bad writing because it is a piece of bad feeling; it is a piece of bad feeling because it is not alive and alert to its subject, it has not *realized* its subject. That is not to say, of course, that there is not a subject there, waiting to be brought to life; male crudeness and female delicacy are as real as their opposites, and the consequences in the children of a marriage in which male crudeness has invaded female delicacy may very well be disabling. But no lines of life run from this passage to the great sources of the novel's energy of narration. Paul seems to make some sort of a fist of breaking out of virginity, for a start. Mrs Morel does not seem to have been blundered into. Paul incurs enough reproach to be getting on with.

That there are things to be thought about here, issues raised — about boyish and girlish modesty, as well as about the spiritualization of sex — that have to do with *Sons and Lovers* is clear,but I suggest that the bad feeling — and (what goes with that) bad thinking — is one of the signs that a difficulty is being evaded. The very generalness of the language is a hint — in the context of, say, Beatrice and Arthur, Annie and Leonard, William and Gyp, and even Walter and Gertrude — that the real source of Paul's problem has not been found, and perhaps that its discovery is not actually desired.

In the second of those five passages, Walter has just offered to take Gertrude down the mine, and the offer, coming freshly on the heels of her surprise at having met a miner, startles a small vision in her, which the language of the passage quite delicately makes real to us. The awkward phrase "tract of life" — "tract" faintly whispering "pamphlet" in our ears, and murmuring of the merely geographical — allows us to sense Gertrude's own awkwardness. The faintly biblical "toiling below earth" helps us to understand that "realized" has something mental, conceptual, in its "real," and at the end of the sentence we meet the gentleness of "evening," and perhaps its sentimentality, leading as it does to "noble," which *we* have had no evidence that Walter is. But his tenderness rings true; his concern, as his little speech makes clear, *is* tender. And if we want to know what sort of happiness she had for three months, the intimacy of being "thee'd" and "thou'd" gives us our answer; she was tenderly loved, in a way her father, we guess, could never have made conceivable to her.

When we come to Paul thinking about all this, what's immediately striking is the wordiness of all he says. If there is some kind of truth in it all — and our evidence is that there certainly is so far as his mother and father are concerned (but what a curious coincidence it is that he says "three months": surely only the novel knew *that*) — nevertheless one might wonder that Paul does not see his *father* as being free of "sterility" (though it *is*, of course, Clara that the conversation is thinking about) and that Miriam has so little to offer in it, is a mere interlocutor (though one could argue that this is because Paul's thoughts are entering an area Miriam has never ventured into). One wonders again who are these "hundreds of people you meet every day," and how far "big and intense" takes us, or the repetitiveness that perhaps tries to *will* into being "the real, real flame of feeling;" one might wonder, more generally, about the notion that if someone seems not "sterile" then it must be because he — or rather, she — has had three months of "*real* joy and satisfaction," which is different (presumably) from just joy and satisfaction, in (presumably) sex. Miriam might well ask what has happened.

Paul is young, sex is important, some people are more mature than others; but the novel is not making much attempt, in passages like this, to show that it knows more about all that than Paul knows. It seems stuck where he is stuck, in a *belief* that wholeness of being has something to do with successful, or satisfactory, or fulfilling, sex, or sexual love.

About the last pages of Chapter VIII, where we have Gertrude telling Paul she's never had a husband — and, a little later, have a duel, a fainting mother, and Paul's request that she abjure the marital bed (and it's the same mother who, much later, is given a poisonous potion to drink, for what that's worth) — it's as hard to think, I find, as it would be about molten lava you might find yourself looking at through a crack in a garden bed one fine morning. The easy thing is to say something about Oedipus and pass on, or by; but the problem is not to find a label, but to see how the lava connects with the garden; I am tempted to say that lava is so out of character in a garden that it cannot be assimilated to it, that lava does not explain gardens except in the most unhelpful way, the way nuclear reactions in the sun explain Surfers Paradise. Its importance, I suggest, is to alert us to the possibility that there are powers in this novel that hardly find expression — they are not what we see in Paul and his mother as he proudly takes her to Lincoln and she is proudly taken: nothing there, or even in the flower conversations, awkward as some of them are, needs special explanation — and the importance of glimpsing those powers having a bit of a surge is that we are able to pinpoint, *in the novel itself*, a possible source of dislocation, a source unaccommodated in it, and therefore possibly disturbing.

Disturbances are to be felt, it seems to me, all through Part II of *Sons and Lovers*. Paul wonders about Miriam, loses his way, and circles round to try to find it again; the novel does much the same. An insoluble problem — a problem such as liking what you don't like — has been reached, a maze has been entered; various alleys are explored but found to be deadends, and the victim is freed only when the hedge is fed a very large dose of morphia and killed.

Typically, it is not action but thought that constitutes the interest of Part II. It's not what Miriam does, but what what she does means, that matters to Paul. I do not wish to be thought to be implying that a soliloquy, say, cannot "act" in a drama, that novels cannot be made out what characters think; the greatest dramas are, clearly, by great thinkers about great thinkers — for Hamlet and Lear are nothing if not great thinkers. But when we read, about Miriam, as Paul tells her they must separate, that

> She knew she felt in a sort of bondage to him, which she hated because she could not control it. She had hated her love for him from the moment it grew too strong for her. And, deep down, she had hated him because she loved him and he dominated her. (p. 317)

not only is that hard to believe, from any evidence in the narrative, but the very language makes it doubtful. The violent attempt of the three "hated"s to induce conviction, the vulgar vaugeness of "a sort of" and "deep down," and the indigestible paradox of "she had hated him because she loved him" all work to make us wonder if it is not anxiety rather than understanding that produces prose like this. Often enough, of course, Lawrence is calm enough, examining Paul's anxiety, holding it up for us to see:

> "What does she mean to me, after all? She represents something, like a bubble of foam represents the sea. But what is *she*? It's not her I care for." Then, startled by his own unconscious thoughts, that seemed to speak so distinctly that all the morning could hear, he undressed and ran quickly down the sands. (p. 381)

and there is much, better than this, that distinguishes the writing in this Part of the novel, much even in the entanglements of Paul and Miriam that are the understood entanglements of young lives, rather than the entanglements of a mind partly disabled from thinking about young lives, much that takes us clear of those entanglements altogether. But there remains a world of difference between the clarity and ease and good sense of this, say:

> There was always this feeling of jangle and discord in the Leivers family. Although the boys resented so bitterly this eternal appeal to their deeper feelings of resignation and proud humility, yet it had its effect on them. They could not establish between themselves and an outsider just the ordinary human feeling and unexaggerated friendship; they were always restless for the something deeper. Ordinary folk seemed shallow to them, trivial and inconsiderable. And so they were unaccustomed, painfully uncouth in the simplest social intercourse, suffering, and yet insolent in their superiority. Then beneath was the yearning for the soul-intimacy to which they could not attain because they were too dumb, and every approach to close connection was blocked by their clumsy contempt of other people. They wanted genuine intimacy, but they could not get even normally near to anyone, because they scorned to take the first steps, they scorned the triviality which forms common human intercourse. (p. 161)

and this:

> Now he realized that she had not been with him all the time, that her soul had stood apart, in a sort of horror. He was physically at rest, but no more. Very dreary at heart, very sad, and very tender, his fingers wandered over her face pitifully. Now again she loved him deeply. He was tender and beautiful.
>
> "The rain!" he said.
>
> "Yes — is it coming on you?"

> She put her hands over him, on his hair, on his shoulders, to feel if the raindrops fell on him. She loved him dearly. He, as he lay with his face on the dead pine-leaves, felt extraordinarily quiet. He did not mind if the raindrops came on him: he would have lain and got wet through: he felt as if nothing mattered, as if his living were smeared away into the beyond, near and quite lovable. This strange, gentle reaching-out to death was new to him. (p. 307)

This is not the expense of spirit in a waste of shame, not opposites held in one understanding as they are in that sonnet; it is opposites casually and even arbitrarily following one another, with death lowered from the flies at the end to negate all opposites, and as the representative, I suggest, of some obscure, unacknowledged feeling that nearly emerges in the following pages, where sex is linked with death, but in a fairly conventional way.

While recognizing Lawrence's inspired attempts (so often commented on) at capturing, even unsuccessfully, complex or evanescent states of being, we must nevertheless keep the right and capacity to distinguish between degrees of success, to say, for example, that he knows more than the Leivers boys know about themselves, but does not know more than Paul does, here. (Otherwise, for one thing, we might find it too easy to blame on Miriam what, despite occasional honourable but often clumsy authorial efforts at restoring a just balance between them, is perhaps rather more Paul's fault than it is hers). It is even possible, I think, to see the whole Clara episode partly as a way of demonstrating that the lack of success in the earlier relationship was not Paul's fault — though to talk in terms of "faults" is to oversimplify what is at all times a complex business).

Love does not make anything whole for Paul. The transference of first love, mother love, is not successfully effected. With all his education, all his middle-class refinements, all his superior talents, all his distinguished individuality, all his thinking and reading and painting, he cannot manage it. It all fails him, all that consciousness, and it's really no surprise that — even though it's not in revenge for having made that failure inevitable — he kills its origin. But at the very end of the novel, he walks "towards the faintly humming, glowing town, quickly," and the "quickly" suggests that he is going towards life, towards light and movement. What it does not overtly say, or even suggest, is that he is going towards work, too.

Accounts of Lawrence the man suggest that in many ways he was quite like his father, and in particular in his delight in work. I like to think that in his own life Lawrence came closer to discovering what could help to make a whole of life than in *Sons and Lovers* he found.

The evidence is there, it seems to me, in many pages through the novel, evidence that it is in their work that men and women make the most and the best of themselves, not in their love, that it is work that fulfils, that joins, that creates, that breaks barriers, that makes whole. One might even claim that the degree to which a character in *Sons and Lovers* works is the degree to which that character finds fulfilment. It is perhaps a poor lookout for love, which tends to begin where work ends, and towards the end of the novel Paul is coming closer to an understanding of this.

> "The night is free to you," he replied. "In the daytime I want to be my myself."
> "But why?" she said. "Why, even now, when we are on this short holiday?"
> "I don't know. Love-making stifles me in the daytime." (p. 382)

It stifles *Sons and Lovers* rather, too. But if the novel is about love, it is about work, too, and perhaps the survival of Walter Morel is a representation, in the complex art of the book, of the power of a lively force in it deeper than even Lawrence's understanding of the Morels and Bestwood quite reached.