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Notes

1. The article is available on-line at <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/10244766/Colm-Toibin-on-Sons-and-Lovers.html>>.
2. Wilson 237-38.

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"I tell you it has got form – form":

Plot, Structure, and Meaning in *Sons and Lovers*

Andrew Harrison

Sons and Lovers has always presented a distinctive challenge to students and critics of Lawrence's work because – more than any of his other novels – it compels readers to confront the subject of form as a central component in the process of interpretation. The novel invites us to discover structure and meaning through its patterned use of repetition and complex interrogation of causation and consequence, consistently situating the actions and choices of its characters in relation to the broader historical, religious, and psychological forces that shape their lives. This is made clear in the opening paragraphs, which describe the emergence and development of the Nottinghamshire-Derbyshire coalfields over a period of two centuries before focusing in on one specific house in The Bottoms at Bestwood, as if implying that individual lives can only be understood within changing historical contexts.

Paul Poplawski has noted how the novel is organized "around the church year of holy days and festivals" (73), with many of the key events taking place at Christmas and Easter; the characters' experiences are amplified by their relation to important moments in the liturgical calendar, so that instances of birth, self-sacrifice, and death in the Morel family naturally acquire symbolic resonances. Likewise, as successive generations of psychoanalytic critics have shown,¹ the feelings and desires of the characters and similarities and contrasts between their situations seem to reflect a less conscious deep structure in the novel, revealing the subtle influences and psychological displacements generated by family dynamics. The autonomy of the individual is bounded by involuntary repetition and a compulsion to resolve deep-rooted causes of emotional



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impasse, so that, for example, the young Gertrude Coppard's choice of partner between the cultured John Field and passionate Walter Morel is echoed in her son Paul's choice between Miriam Leivers and Clara Dawes, and Paul's impulse to bring about a reconciliation between Clara and her estranged husband Baxter seems to signal an underlying wish on his part to redress his parents' marital alienation.

Yet if part of the joy of reading *Sons and Lovers* has always emerged from discovering such rewarding structures and patterns, the novel has also come under attack for perceived biases, contradictions, and inconsistencies in its form. These attacks have typically hinged on criticism of Lawrence's use of perspective. One early and influential essay by Mark Schorer argued that the dominance of Mrs. Morel's perspective in the novel distorts the objectivity of its presentation of characters. Kate Millett famously honed in on what she saw as the novel's failure to properly critique Paul Morel's viewpoint and especially his dismissive attitude toward Clara's suffragism and his sometimes chauvinistic understanding of women's submissive roles in relationships and in the workplace. In a similar spirit, Graham Holderness noted the novel's failure to address fully the conditions of Walter Morel's life as a miner, but he also acknowledged that the absence of explicit treatment enables it to offer a powerful dramatized critique of Mrs. Morel's ideology of self-improvement, which lifts her sons out of the working class only to leave them isolated and unfulfilled.

Today critics are more likely to celebrate the meaningful ambivalence of *Sons and Lovers* rather than castigating Lawrence for his perceived partiality or refusal to examine in detail the nature of a miner's working life and the relationship between gender, power, and opportunity. This shift reflects the critical turn from an earlier author-centered approach to more recent New Critical, historicist, and deconstructive methodologies. Two casebooks of modern critical essays on the novel, published after the appearance of the Cambridge edition in 1992, allow readers to grasp in outline the movements in its critical fortunes up to 2005. Rick Rylance's volume helpfully reprints Louis Martz's seminal 1968 essay on the conflicted design of *Sons and Lovers*, which writes back to Schorer, while the Oxford University Press casebook that I edited with John Worthen reprints a chapter from a book by Margaret Storch that implicitly challenges Millett's views on the role of women in the novel, drawing on earlier work by Anne Smith, Carol Dix, and Hilary Simpson. Since 2005, Jeff Wallace, Ronald Granofsky, and Violeta Sotirova have offered important revisionary accounts of the novel, identifying tonal, symbolic, and perspectival ambiguities that upset any attempt we might make to identify a dominant authorial position or a consistent attitude toward machines and the mechanical, or toward working-class models

of masculinity. The new essays collected in this number of the *D. H. Lawrence Review* contribute to the modern re-evaluation of the novel by drawing upon and extending the approaches of these and other critics, providing fresh insights into the nature and coherence of its plot and structure, and its approaches to several contentious issues, including gender and psychology.

This essay attempts to explore the way a series of explicit debates around the form and meaning of *Sons and Lovers* actually helped shape the novel during its composition, assuring that complementary and conflicting patterns of meaning were always an integral part of its structure, or structures. In the process of producing its four drafts (between October 1910 and May 1913) Lawrence anticipated, responded to, incorporated, and – of course – resisted advice on the novel's form from a number of individuals with particular aesthetic and emotional investments in his work. I will focus on the influence of his first mentor, Ford Madox Hueffer; his close companion, Jessie Chambers; his second mentor, Edward Garnett; and his partner (and future wife), Frieda Weekley.

First, *Sons and Lovers* was actually designed as a “plotted” novel to offset the perceived formlessness of his first two novels, *The White Peacock* and *The Trespasser*. Ford Madox Hueffer had lamented the “enormous prolixity of detail” (8L 2-3) in *The White Peacock*, and told Lawrence that *The Trespasser* was “a rotten work of genius. It has no construction or form – it is execrably bad art” (JL 339). After Hueffer sent the manuscript of Lawrence's second novel (then entitled “The Saga of Siegmund”) on to Heinemann for their editorial consideration, he told Lawrence that publishing it might permanently damage his reputation because of its erotic focus. As a consequence, on 18 October 1910 Lawrence wrote to Sydney Pawling at Heinemann, encouraging him to put it aside, and wait instead for “Paul Morel”:

I should want, I do want, to overhaul the book considerably as soon as you care to return it to me. I am not anxious to publish it, and if you are of like mind, we can let the thing stay, and I will give you – with no intermediary this time – my third novel, ‘Paul Morel’, which is plotted out very interestingly (to me), and about one-eighth of which is written. ‘Paul Morel’ will be a novel – not a florid prose poem, or a decorated idyll running to seed in realism: but a restrained, *somewhat* impersonal novel. It interests me very much. (8L 4)

The early chapter plan of the novel that Lawrence appears to allude to here was written into one of his Nottingham University College notebooks opposite some botany notes on the form and physiology of the ixia plant.² He retained some of the specific events it outlines in subsequent drafts of the novel, but

only one of the characters (Walter Morel) made it into the published text under the same name. The mother figure is not directly named in the plan; in her place Lawrence draws on a character named "Aunt Ada" (perhaps based on his maternal aunt Ada Krenkow) and on his friends Flossie Cullen, Mabel Limb, and their families in order to flesh out the plot. However, one structural aspect of the chapter plan stands out: Lawrence had clearly decided to divide the novel into two parts and to conclude each part with the death of a character (or characters), though in this case it is Walter Morel, his son Fred, and Flossie Cullen's governess who die at the conclusions of Parts I and II.³

Lawrence probably adopted this structure in the novel as a direct response to Hueffer's commitment to "the accurate-impersonal school of Flaubert" (*JL* 169) and to his mentor's strongly held belief in logical design and formal cohesiveness. The strength of Hueffer's commitment to Flaubert is made clear in his 1924 book, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance*, in which he reflects on his and Conrad's shared literary values at the turn of the century:

Our chief masters in style were Flaubert and Maupassant: Flaubert in the greater degree, Maupassant in the less. In about the proportion of a sensible man's whisky and soda. We stood as it were on those hills and thence regarded the world. (MacShane 81)

Hueffer must have hoped that Lawrence would produce a novel of working-class life whose form would be comparable to "Odour of Chrysanthemums," with its elaborately patterned symbolism, tight temporal structure, and extensive use of ironic prolepsis.⁴ Yet, if Lawrence plotted out his third novel in response to Hueffer's literary values and advice, even drawing (as he had done in the story) on real events in the lives of members of his extended family,⁵ his work on it revealed how far his writing practice departed from the Flaubertian model of logical aloofness and unity. Lawrence's insistence that his new novel would only be "*somewhat* impersonal" is borne out by the sections of the second version written between March and July 1911 and now published as *Paul Morel*. The vivid and dramatic descriptions of certain early incidents in Paul's life in Chapters IV and V (his love of making fuses with his father, his shocked response to Annie's stories, his fascination with the trucks at the crossing on Engine Lane, his accident in the sledge at Nethermere, and the antics of his pet rabbit Adolphus)⁶ provide little or no support for the subsequent accounts of his father's deterioration or the tensions in his relationship with Miriam Staynes (the prototype for Miriam Leivers). As a result, the logical cause and development of negative emotional dynamics in these cases have to be hastily sketched in,

almost superimposed onto the more comical and contingent childhood scenes.⁷

During the two re-writings of the novel Lawrence removed or toned down these early scenes in order to accentuate the causal connection between the failure of the Morels' marriage, the conflict in the household, and Paul's later psychological development. Lawrence achieved a greater degree of integration in the plot by cutting or revising sections of text likely to distract the reader from perceiving the family tensions. For example, he significantly revised the fuse-making scene in which Walter Morel tells his children stories about Taffy the pit-pony, effectively removing much of its warmth and liveliness and presenting the father's good humor as a mere interlude in the dominant pattern of his displacement and descent into alienation and hostility.⁸ As Helen Baron has noted, the narrator's comment in the published novel that the "story of Taffy would go on *interminably*, and everybody loved it" (*SL* 89; my italics) shows how the children's enthusiasm is checked by the introduction of a carefully chosen negative adverb (35). The loss of all but a small part of the third version means that we cannot know whether Lawrence made the structural changes straight away.⁹ However, after he had finished this third version in early June 1912, he still felt that it was looser and less tightly structured than Hueffer would have wished it to be. In a letter of 10 June 1912, he told Walter de la Mare (the new resident reader at Heinemann) that the novel, which he had forwarded to the publisher the day before, was "not so strongly concentric as the fashionable folk under French influence – you see I suffered badly from Hueffer re Flaubert and perfection – want it." He now suggested that he might "cut the childhood part" altogether (*JL* 417).

On 1 July William Heinemann wrote to Lawrence rejecting the novel, citing its "lack of unity" as one reason for his decision (*JL* 421). Only once the novel had been re-written for a fourth time, then edited by Edward Garnett and published by Duckworth, did Lawrence have the confidence and experience to articulate his quarrel with Hueffer's literary values and a strictly logical approach to form. In a May 1913 essay on Thomas Mann, published under the title "German Books" in the July 1913 number of the *Blue Review*, Lawrence would refer to the great German writer as "the last sick-sufferer from the complaint of Flaubert," arguing that the "craving for form is the outcome, not of artistic conscience, but of a certain attitude to life" (*JR* 211, 207). The essay ascribes the desire for impersonal form in both Mann and Gustav von Aschenbach to an innately suicidal impulse to counter and negate the messiness of life. Over fourteen years later, Lawrence repeated the same criticism of Flaubert in his translator's preface to Giovanni Verga's short story collection *Cavalleria Rusticana*, where he located the value of the Italian's writing precisely in the way he surpassed

his clumsy adherence to Flaubertian self-effacement in order to capture the swoops and rhythms of an “unsophisticated mind,” embracing “the sense of jumble and incoherence” (JR 172-73). The compositional history of *Sons and Lovers* reveals Lawrence’s commitment to incorporating new impulses into his writing, putting contingency and a restless and subversive approach to plot and structure at the center of his own writing practice.

The only formal element to survive wholly intact from the early chapter plan into the published novel was the two-part structure. Although the first part of the published version ends with William’s death, the final chapter of the second is less concerned with the death of Gertrude Morel than with Paul’s response to it and the feelings of detachment, despair, rebellion and resolution it creates in him. In the process of re-writing and revising the novel, Lawrence displaced and overlaid the original patterns with various other complementary and competing structures in the manner of a palimpsest. Several of these structures are traceable to the influence of other important figures in Lawrence’s early career as a writer.

The first of these is Jessie Chambers. Lawrence took seriously Jessie’s commitment to factual recall or documentary truthfulness in re-writing and re-structuring his narrative, but finally rejected this in favor of acquiring an analytical perspective on his early life. The last chapter of Jessie’s memoir of Lawrence, her letters, and her manuscript annotations detail her involvement in trying to influence the content and structure of the novel. In the memoir she describes Lawrence as “rudderless” after his mother’s death in December 1910, and she recalls sending an autobiographical short story to him in order to steer him towards an awareness of his mother’s negative influence on him:

I wanted to make the effect of his mother’s attitude clear to him [...] So I recollected the incidents of that occasion [when, as a boy of twenty, he had come to Jessie and told her that “he had looked into his heart and could not find that he loved me as a husband should love his wife”] with scrupulous care and sent them to him in the form of a short story some time in the spring of 1911. (E.T. 186)

Lawrence asked Jessie to read the second draft of the novel in October 1911. It was she who recommended that he should draw more closely on the life of his nuclear family, and incorporate the death of his brother, William Ernest.

So in my reply I told him I was very surprised that he had kept so far from

reality in his story; that I thought what had really happened was much more poignant and interesting than the situations he had invented. In particular I was surprised that he had omitted the story of Ernest, which seemed to me vital enough to be worth telling as it actually happened. Finally I suggested that he should write the whole story again, and keep it true to life [...] In all this I acted from pure intention, arising out of my deep knowledge of his situation. [...] He fell in absolutely with my suggestion and asked me to write what I could remember of our early days, because, as he truthfully said, my recollection of those days was so much clearer than his. (E.T. 192-93)

The key phrase in those final sentences is “keep it true to life”: Jessie sought not only to provide the factual material for the novel, but also to influence by a sort of literary osmosis the manner in which it was presented. She did this through a combination of the notes with memories of their youth that she sent to Lawrence and through the comments she made on the third draft of the novel between February and March 1912. Lawrence actually incorporated the event recounted in Jessie’s short story into his novel almost immediately (in the second draft), yet he often acted on her suggestions in a manner contrary to the spirit of her intervention. In mid-May 1912 he told her: “I am going through Paul Morel. I’m sorry it turned out as it has. You’ll have to go on forgiving me” (JL 408).

When he revised the novel for the final time in Germany and Italy between July and November 1912, drawing on notes given to him by Edward Garnett, Lawrence decisively overturned any residual commitment he may have felt to presenting his own youth and early manhood and his relationship with Jessie in a factually accurate or sympathetic light. By this time, he was using his writing as a means of breaking with his past and with his earlier self; he claimed to “*loathe* Paul Morel” (JL 427). When he sent Jessie the proofs of the novel in March 1913, she responded by returning his cover letter and ending their friendship. On 23 March she wrote to Helen Corke about the novel:

The Miriam part of the novel is a slander, a fearful treachery. David has selected every point which sets off Miriam at a disadvantage, and he has interpreted her every word and action, and thought in the light of Mrs Morel’s hatred of her. (Letters 27)

On Garnett’s advice, Jessie had turned her short story of 1911 into a novel, initially entitled “The Rathie Primrose” (after a phrase from Milton’s “Lycidas”); it was later re-titled “Eunice Temple.” Lawrence and Frieda requested this manuscript from Garnett in March 1913 and read it a matter of weeks before

the London publication of *Sons and Lovers*. Lawrence said that it made him “so miserable I had hardly the energy to walk out of the house for two days” (LL 551). Frieda thought it “a faded photograph of *Sons and Lovers*”; it made her realize “the amazing brutality of *Sons and Lovers*” (LL 550).

Frieda evidently shared Lawrence’s conviction that an aesthetic commitment to logical form or to a sequence of remembered events must be subordinated in the last resort to the less deliberate structure that emerges gradually from a painful overcoming of one’s sicknesses in writing.¹⁰ For her, the value of the novel as a work of art rested precisely in the way that it privileges courageous commitment to an inner truth over the stymied idea of form that she associated with Ernest Weekley and with the English, who “cant come out of their snail house” (LL 479). She fought with Lawrence to make him appreciate the novel for the insights it offers into the depth of his earlier love for his mother.¹¹ Frieda, of course, had a particular interest in coaxing him to achieve critical detachment from his past. In “*Not I, But the Wind . . .*,” she describes *Sons and Lovers* as the first book she wrote with Lawrence. She recalls Lawrence asking her advice on what his mother would have felt at various points in the novel and claims that she “had to go deeply into the character of Miriam and all the others.” Like Jessie, her involvement in Lawrence’s writing of the novel seems to have culminated in her creating an alternative version: “a skit called: ‘Paul Morel, or His Mother’s Darling’” (Frieda Lawrence 74).

The analytical perspective that Jessie saw as a “fearful treachery” became the key aspect of form through which Frieda and Lawrence defended the novel to Edward Garnett after Heinemann had rejected it. In a letter of 19 November 1912, written the day after he posted the manuscript to Garnett, Lawrence wrote:

I hasten to tell you I sent the MS. of the Paul Morel novel to Duckworth, registered, yesterday. And I want to defend it, quick. I wrote it again, pruning it and shaping it and filling it in. I tell you it has got form – form: haven’t I made it patiently, out of sweat as well as blood. (LL 476)

Lawrence naturally relates the form of the novel to the struggles he had in writing it over the course of two very eventful years in his life. His defense of the novel rests on the argument that Mrs. Morel’s excessive love of her sons provides a connecting thread through the plot. He provides a strictly causal précis of the novel, emphasizing the connections between the mother’s lack of satisfaction, her compensatory love for her sons, and the tensions this creates in their subsequent relationships with women. Yet in anticipating Garnett’s objection to the novel’s lack of structure, Lawrence can be seen to overstate his case, as when he claims that: “almost unconsciously, the mother realises what

is the matter, and begins to die” (LL 477). It is doubtful that anyone who has read the novel in any detail will accede to *that* particular description of Gertrude Morel’s long-drawn-out death. His attempt to present the novel’s psychological development in schematic terms is comparable to the carving up of its plot into complexes that he so deplored in Alfred Booth Kuttner’s early Freudian reading of it.¹² Both accounts of the novel show how readily it accommodates different formal interpretations while exposing their blindspots and limitations.

Garnett, of course, was not convinced by Lawrence’s assertions nor by the author’s critical understanding of his novel’s development. He made crucial editorial changes to the text from December 1912, cutting it by ten percent, removing much of the material relating to William Morel in Part I, speeding up its development by shifting the attention more fully to Paul; he also censored some of the more outspoken passages (a process continued by the novel’s printer in 1913). As George Jefferson has noted: “Edward [Garnett]’s influence on the published text of *Sons and Lovers* is complicated by the distinction which must be made between his advice on the text as literature and his role as a publisher’s reader” (149). In cutting the novel, Garnett was certainly acting on his literary principles, skillfully accentuating what he thought was valuable in the novel’s plot, but he was also doing the job of a professional editor, reducing it to the length of other novels of the day and rendering it harmless enough to be accepted by the circulating libraries.

The depth of Garnett’s commitment to supporting Lawrence’s fledgling career as a novelist and to ensuring the commercial success of *Sons and Lovers* is indicated by his late request that Lawrence should produce a pictorial dust-jacket for the novel, with an image “suggesting the collieries – headstocks” (LL 528). Duckworth did not use the final design, created by Lawrence’s friend Ernest Collings; sadly it is no longer extant.¹³ A dust-jacket with an illustration emphasizing a colliery theme would have directed readers to what Garnett clearly thought was the novel’s chief selling-point: its industrial working-class setting. This was hardly the element which Lawrence himself thought most compelling, however, as he worked his weary way through the galley and page proofs. Lawrence’s “Foreword” of January 1913 and the blurbs which he and Frieda sent to Garnett in March 1913¹⁴—all of them unused—would have pointed readers to a very different understanding of the novel as a fictional exploration of the psychological damage done to sons by the force of excessive maternal love: “the tragedy of thousands of young men in England” (LL 477). In the end, Duckworth printed a simple, bland, descriptive notice on the plain wrapper, and readers were left to negotiate for themselves the various structures and meanings in the novel.¹⁵ Lawrence studies today offer few greater challenges