

The Oedipus complex in “Sons and Lovers”

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the use of Freudian Oedipus complex in the novel *Sons and Lovers*. We find special attraction between sons and mother and some sort of hatred for father. In this autobiographical novel, we explore the feelings and expectation of a mother for her sons especially when she fails to draw what she wants to from her husband.

Keywords: Oedipus complex, mother-sons relation, unhappy married life, husband substitute, hatred and death.

INTRODUCTION

Sons and Lovers is an autobiographical novel written by one of the most famous novelists of the Modern Age D. H. Lawrence. This novel is as autobiographical as Arnold Bennet's *Clayhanger* and first half of Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*. We find the impact of Sigmund Freud, Adler and Jung in this novel. The Oedipal complex, also known as the Oedipus complex, is a term used by Sigmund Freud in his theory of psychosexual stages of development to describe a male child's attraction towards his mother. Freud suggested that the Oedipus complex played an important role in the phallic stage of psychosexual development. [<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-an-oedipal-complex-2795403>]

WHAT IS OEDIPUS COMPLEX?

The term Oedipus has been derived from the name of the King Oedipus of Thebes, who, though in ignorance, married his own mother and had children by her. Freud used this term to explain the manifestation of infantile sexuality in the relation of the child to its parents. The Oedipus complex “is a state which a person shows excessive affection for the parent opposite in sex to him or herself, and a corresponding distaste for his or her other parent.” If it is a son who is excessively fond of his mother - as is Paul Morel fond of Mrs Morel- and extends his fondness beyond puberty, adversely affecting the harmony of his relationship with other girls, we may also describe him as a victim of *the mother fixation*.

THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX IN LAWRENCE HIMSELF

It is a well recognised fact that D.H. Lawrence himself was the victim of a deep-rooted Oedipus complex. His mother Lydia Lawrence had a very strong hold on him, and he too treated his mother like a lover. It was she who gave him life-warmth. His orientation into life and literature also depended on the inspiration she gave him. In 1910, when Mrs Lawrence was virtually on death bed, Lawrence wrote to his publisher to make haste with the publication of *The White Peacock* so that his mother could see it while she kept the live consciousness. That they loved each other like young lovers is repeatedly expressed in his early poems also.

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Graham Hough in his discussions of *Sons and Lovers* in *The Dark Sun* says that “the whole situation in the novel presents the Freudian Oedipus imbroglio in classic completeness.” Disillusioned with her husband Walter Morel, Mrs Morel gradually casts him off and takes her two sons William and Paul as husband substitutes one after the other, thus wrecking their emotional life.

THE UNHAPPY MARRIED LIFE OF THE MORELS AND THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX IN WILLIAM

Gertrude Morel, a fantastically moral and religious woman, at twenty-one, marries a warm, sensuous and indulgent miner, Walter

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Morel who had a rich, ringing laugh and a red, moist mouth. The first few months of their married life are extremely happy but gradually the feeble bond of their poetised passion snaps and Mrs Morel feels disgusted with her husband's habitual drunkenness, his indulgent and shiftless ways and his temperamental dishonesty. As her eldest son William grows up, Mrs Morel begins to alienate her husband and seek emotional fulfilment through her son. William also instinctively responds to her. Once, when he is seven, he brings for her, from the fair, two egg-cups with moss roses on them and presents them to her 'almost like a lover'. When he brings home the first prize he has won at school, she receives it almost 'like a queen'. But she is so over-possessive that as William comes in contact with other girls and goes dancing with them, she finds it difficult to tolerate them. In fact she expresses her hostility towards them in rather crude and jarring terms. Later, when William falls in love with a passionate girl called Gyp and brings her home on a short visit, she is vehemently critical of her. Under her influence, Williams finds it difficult to strike a balance between his love for his mother and his infatuation for Gyp, he suffers from terrible spiritual anguish and finally dies.

PAUL AND MRS MOREL

Mrs Morel had conceived Paul unwillingly out of a loveless relation and dreaded his birth. She was afraid that he might be unhealthy or malformed. But the child lay there in her arms and pulling at her heart and 'she felt as if the naval string that had connected its frail little body with hers had not been broken'. And she decided that 'with all her force, with all soul, she would make up to it for having brought it into the world unloved. She would love it all the more now it was here, carry it in her love.' The situation presented here is quiet analogous to the much dreaded portents in the beginning of some Greek tragedy; surely it proves quiet ominous. As Paul grows up, he sticks to his mother and trots after her like her shadow. She too clings to him and encourages him into an abject contempt of his father.

He loves to sleep with his mother. Once when he is ill, he 'lay against her, and slept, and got better; whilst she, always a bad sleeper, fell later on into a profound sleep that seemed to give her faith.'

Now, often at the sight of his mother, Paul's heart 'contracts with love'. She is his intimate, his confidante. He exists for her, and whatever

he does, does for her. When Morel is confined to the hospital through an accident, he joyfully plays the husband: "*I'm the man in the house now.*" He is happiest when alone with her and "*in the end she shared everything with him, without knowing.....she waited for his coming home in the evening, and then she unburdened herself of all she had pondered or of all that had occurred to her during the day. He sat and listened with his earnestness. The two shared lives.*"[1]

According to Freud, the Oedipus complex remains dormant for a few years after the early infantile psycho-sexual development and is reanimated at the time of puberty. In the case of Paul, the early migration to London of William helps in a 'quickening' of his fixation for his mother, though it is finally recognised only when Paul is down with severe attack of pneumonia after William's death. Mrs Morel lies with him at nights and tightens her grip over his soul in a desperate bid to save him from the clutches of death. It is during this illness that Paul 'realises' his mother and he is precisely at the age of puberty.

THE HATRED BETWEEN THE FATHER AND THE SON

The Oedipus complex is bound to entail the envy of the father. The child looks at his father as a rival in his domination over his mother's love, though quite unconsciously. Thus there is generated a feeling of hatred and hostility between the father and the son. Paul really hates his father. Once, Mrs Morel asks him to show his father the prize he has won, and he feels that it would be easier to forfeit the prize than to approach his father for approbation. Paul can never stand even the look of his father and scornfully resists all his attempts to be tender with him. Mrs. Morel's over-of Paul incites much jealousy accompanied with some vague notion of incest assumption in the mind of her husband. In Chapter VIII, there is a very significant episode that brings into focus the entire conflict. Mrs Morel expresses her jealousy of Miriam and suddenly says, "*And I've never-you know, Paul-- I've never had a husband-- not really--*" Paul strokes his mother's hair and his mouth is on her throat. And she kisses him a long, fervent kiss, which is followed by a gentle stroking of her face by Paul. Just then enters Mr. Morel and standing in the doorway, venomously remarks, "*At your mischief again?*"[2]

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A fierce combat might have followed, but Mrs Morel faints and the quarrel is averted. When she regains her consciousness, Paul very empathetically, exhorts her to sleep with Annie and not with his father. The scene begins with Mrs Morel's confession that she never had a husband in the real sense and ends with Paul's ostentatious assumption of that role.

Paul—The Husband Substitute

And in fact, throughout the second half of the novel, we find that Paul has taken the role of the head of the house. His relation with his mother is that of a husband substitute. He instinctively sticks to her as if he were her man. On their visit to Nottingham he chatted away with his mother and she was gay like a sweetheart”. Later ‘they walked down the station street, feeling the excitement of lovers having an adventure together; they arrived home in the mellow evening, happy and glowing, and tired.’ During a visit to Mrs Leiver's Farm ‘they went out into the wood that was flooded with bluebells.....the bluebells.....the mother and the son were in ecstasy together.’ The flowers which Paul sticks in her coat offer another concrete symbol of this love. But perhaps one of the clearest examples is found in Paul's regretful raving at having an ‘old’ mother for a sweetheart:

Why can't a man have a young mother? What is the old for?

“Well,” his mother laughed, “she can scarcely help it.”

“And why wasn't I the oldest son? Look—they say the young

ones have the advantage—but look, they had the young mother.

You should have had me for your oldest son.[3]

RELATIONS WITH MIRIAM AND CLARA

Such a relation is bound to affect the wholesome sexual relationship with any other woman. Paul fails to strike balanced relationship both with Miriam and Clara. The responsibility of these failures does not entirely lie with Paul, for what Miriam and Clara offer him are, in the words of Mark Spilka, only ‘counterfeit loves’. Miriam, waggling in the abstractions of her nun-like religious love, can behave, during a sex encounter, only like a martyr awaiting immolation. The effort caused in keeping either Miriam or himself out of count while engaged in

sex-union proves too strenuous for Paul and exhausts his passion just within a week.

And Clara who can offer just the baptism of passion is too small to hold his whole being. Paul soon feels stifled her excessive hunger for love-making. Paul is an artist and artists are generally lovers and tender-hearted. The passionate and wild nature of Clara allures Paul but not for too long. Excess of anything should be avoided in life and Paul applies the same theory. He starts avoiding Clara for she is an epitome of passion and wild love whereas Paul is tender and he is not able to have Clara for long. Miriam on the other hand is equal of Paul but he does never find a mother substitute in her. He wants a beloved and in her he wants the image and care of a mother. But there is another aspect of it also. In Chapter XIII, Paul tells his mother that he loved Clara deeply. He had loved Miriam also. But at the same time could not possibly marry them.

“You haven't met the right woman.”

“And I never shall meet the right woman while you live,” he said.[4]

Both spiritually and physically Paul is glued to his mother. The pull she wields is too strong to allow any other centre of attraction in the field to retain any vitality. Paul must always be seeking for mother-image in his woman. Miriam could be a mother substitute, but at the spiritual level, so long as Mrs Morel is living, she can at best excite rivalry, and at the physical level, because of her negative spirituality, she can only drain manliness out of Paul. Clara is simply rejected because Paul fails to find in her the mother image. But while Paul gets dissatisfied both with Miriam and Clara, he clings on to his mother. Their inter-dependence on each other never declines. Once, when his sister Annie marries, he tries to console his mother, *“But I shan't marry mother. I shall live with you, and we'll have a servant.”*

As the mother does not feel comforted, he proceeds to elaborate his plans. *“I'll give you till seventy-five. There you are, I'm fat and forty-four. Then I'll marry a staid body. See!.....And we'll have a pretty house, you and me, and a servant, and it'll be just all right.”* This is a very childish way of thinking but it persists. [5]

NO RELEASE EVEN IN DEATH

The last but one chapter of this novel is titled *The Release*. But the title is rather misleading, for instead of securing Paul's release, it

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confirms his allegiance to her. “*Death has merely removed the last earthly obstacle to their ideal union, now he can love her as Dante loved his Beatrice.*” He breaks off both with Miriam and Clara. He becomes indifferent to life and death alike. In fact, life for him is only where his mother is and she is dead. The last chapter is called *Derelict* and it emphasises Lawrence’s meaning in no mistakable terms.

OEDIPUS, HAMLET AND PAUL

The case of Paul differs from that of either Oedipus or Hamlet. The sin of Oedipus was a sin of ignorance and till the discovery was made his relation with his mother did not carry any suggestions of self-approach. Hamlet’s complex was rooted purely in his subconscious; its outward manifestation was in an affirmed denouncement of his mother for her incestual marriage with his uncle. Paul is not altogether unaware of the presence of this complex, but though he often struggles for release, he does not indulge in any self-approach in its account. He usually obeys the fierce instinct loyally. The social instinct of the novelist does not allow him to violate what is inviolably sacrosanct, still Lawrence never tries to eliminate the physical suggestions. He tries to represent faithfully the primitive psychodynamics without transgressing the social decor.

The bond between the sons and the mother is the direct outcome of Oedipus complex. Both William and Paul hate their father and Paul even pray to the God that his father should die. When William is born, Walter the husband becomes an outsider as he is not given love, care, affection and attention. The sons treat their father as their enemy. In the Greek mythology, Oedipus commits the sin of killing his own father and marrying his own biological mother unconsciously and under a curse but the suffering of Walter at the hands of his sons and his wife Gertrude is done deliberately and intentionally. In the modern age, whatever we do knowingly or unknowingly it is the psychological dilemma set by modern psychologists on the basis of their observations and studies.

The suffering of Paul and Mrs Morel is no less than the suffering of Oedipus and Jocasta. William and Paul are not able to form intimate bond with their beloved. They are not able to form union with their souls and they keep on dangling between their mother and their beloved.

It is this Oedipus complex that forbids Paul to think about any other woman to be his life partner. He is like Hamlet divided between head and heart. The head says don’t ditch the mother and the heart says Miriam is a nice woman to live with. But he keeps on struggling on the point that he is unable to find the mother substitute in Miriam. The true and real solace can be found only in the mother and this is why it seems as if the naval string is still attached. Paul cannot find his personality away from his mother. He dies every second in his life when it is revealed that Mrs Morel is suffering from cancer. The love was so much so that he gives the overdose of morpheme to his mother to set her free from the pain. The bond was so strong that even after the death of his mother, he chooses to live alone and he leaves Miriam forever. Though the mother was not alive but she is always there in his mind saying that no woman is right for him.

CONCLUSION

Sons and Lovers has been described as the first Freudian novel in English. It does present the Freudian Oedipus Complex, but the concept of its story was not altered by Freud’s theories. Lawrence had already completed the final draft of his novel before he became acquainted with the ideas of Freud. In 1912, when Lawrence was in Germany, Freud was one of the topics commonly discussed with Frieda but, since Lawrence was trying to understand his own experience, it is most unlikely that he altered the story to conform to the theories of Freud. Graham Hough is right when he says that Freud could and almost certainly did do is ‘to set a theoretical seal on a situation that had been very thoroughly explored in actuality.

Lawrence has used the Oedipus complex theory in this novel but unknowingly. His love for his mother is shown through the character of Paul Morel. As Sons and Lovers is an autobiographical novel, we find that D.H. Lawrence has given a true and real account of his life and how he felt and experienced in the company of his mother.

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