Title: Gender and language in 'Sons and Lovers.'
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Sons and Lovers occupy an ambivalent position in the canon of D. H. Lawrence. Scholars rank it below his masterpieces -- The Rainbow and Women in Love -- and yet it has been particularly attractive to the "common reader." It has the clearly autobiographical elements we expect in a writer's first novel, even though it is Lawrence's third. In addition, it pays its respects to the realist tradition of such essentially English novelists as George Eliot and Thomas Hard. Sons and Lovers has also appealed to some because it was Lawrence's last novel before the controversies surrounding The Rainbow in his lifetime and those surrounding a novel like The Plumed Serpent in ours.

More than anything else he wrote, Sons and Lovers has opened Lawrence's work to traditional psychoanalytic readings. When the novel appeared in 1913, the English psychoanalyst Barbara Low, for example, urged her friends to read it as an expression of Freud's Oedipus theory. Lawrence had written the penultimate version of the novel before he met Frieda and learned from her what she knew of "Freud," as it was filtered through his disciple Otto Gross, her lover of just four years before. Frederick J. Hoffman, who interviewed Frieda in 1942, argues that Lawrence was almost immediately resistant to Frieda's Freudian reading of his text; however, he probably focused more fully on the relationship between Paul and his mother in the final revision. Paul Morel's sexual dysfunction was based on Lawrence's, even though the narrator attempts to find similarities in a "good many of the nicest men he knew" (279).

Traditional psychoanalytic readings of Sons and Lovers, initiated by Lawrence's associates like Barbara Low and by Frieda herself, were given a boost by John Middleton Murry in his biography of Lawrence, subtitled Son of Woman. "Freudian" readings of Lawrence and Sons have persisted in our own time in the work of Mark Spilka, Daniel Weiss (Oedipus in Nottingham), and as recently as James Cowan's D. H. Lawrence and the Trembling Balance (1990). Cowan speaks for a traditional "psychoanalytic" approach in arguing:

If critical reading may be seen as analogous to the analytic situation,
then the text projected by the author corresponds to the patient's
projective identification. The critical reader is then in the position of the
analyst, who receives, internally processes, and responds to the
communication, reflecting understanding and appropriate interpretation
of what has been communicated. (10)

This kind of simplistic reduction of the literary text to the unmediated ramblings of a patient on the analyst's couch can only end by privileging the critic over the artist and by perpetuating the misguided notion of an encoded text whose "hidden meanings" can be deciphered only by the sleuthing critic for the astonished reader's edification.

To replace such "Freudian" readings, I would propose a "new psychoanalytic criticism." Unlike earlier varieties, this psychoanalytic criticism of literature, as practiced by theorists like Shoshana Felman and Peter Brooks, is not intent upon the "psychoanalytic study of authors, readers, or fictional characters" (Brooks, xiv). This "narratology" attempts to apply psychoanalytic insights to narrative and intersubjectivity, or the interchange between "subjects" -- the traditional term "individuals" having been dismissed for its suggestion of autonomous, integrated "selves." Such practice owes an immense debt to Freud's most astute reader -- Jacques Lacan.
Like Freud's, the psychology associated with Lacan's writings is grounded in a notion of the unconscious. For Lacan, the unconscious was not Freud's romantically dark and chaotic underworld of irrational drives or instincts but a fabric or text woven from the infant's reception of auditory and visual images, virtually from birth. The unconscious is a structure of words (even before those words are "understood") as well as auditory and visual images that the infant receives through the ear and eye, but especially the eye. Because it is born "premature," the infant is absolutely dependent upon its female care-giver and spends its first six months restricted to hearing and gazing at what is closest to it. In this stage, the maternal body and objects, as well as the objects of hearing and gazing, become confused: as the French psychoanalyst Michelle Montrelay says, "hearing is very close to the eye, which is seen by the child as an eye-ear, an open hole" (qtd. by Ragland-Sullivan, 20). In this way, the unconscious becomes associated with all those early images and sensory experiences taken in by the eye and ear. This visual-verbal construct forms the abstract signifiers, or what Lacan calls the "letters" of the body, the effects of outside phenomena through touch, the gaze, sounds, and images. The body is thus eroticized, as these external signifiers become associated with the "letters" of the body, or the erotogenic zones, which Freud termed "mouth, anus, phallus, genitals." As "letters" or erotogenic zones of the (m)Other, voice and eye become erotic organs, or part objects of Desire.

Lacan's focus upon infancy led to his theory of the "mirror stage." Between the ages six and eighteen months, Lacan hypothesizes a literal encounter with the mirror in which the infant discovers difference in the the reverse mirror image. That image is the first expression of an "other" as totalized unity, distinct from the subject's perception of itself as fragmented and dispersed. In contrast to the subject's bumbling movements, the mirror image is static, symmetrical, statuelike, as an ideal unity. The subject's jubilation in discovering an ideal outside itself is the beginning of alienation, a movement away from a natural fusion with the (m)other, the first step toward dependence upon culture. Lacan also understood the mirror as metaphor, as the subject's identification with the (m)other before eighteen months, a kind of Edenic fusion with the other before the fall into language and individuation. This stage of unity and harmony is, however, fraught with anxiety since the other cannot be possessed. Indeed, when the eighteen-month-old discovers that its parents do not uniformly respond to its demands, it is ready to move from the Imaginary to the Symbolic.

At eighteen months, the subject also has achieved some mastery of motor coordination, and its psychic energies can now be directed toward mastery of this "foreign language" that has had its impact upon the subject since birth. The father intrudes upon the mother-child dyad as a representation of the "Nom-du-Pere," or the Name-of-the-Father, Lacan punning on the French homonyms "nom" and "non," or "name" and "no." For Lacan, the Oedipal impulse is not the infant's desire to possess the mother sexually, but the impulse to preserve symbiotic unity with the (m)other even though that unity has been paid for with the repression of difference. At the very time, then, that the infant is learning to represent things as words, the Name-of-the-Father (represented by the literal father or some other adult male) is intervening with its no to the desire for unity, a prohibition commensurate with the subject's recognition of its own psychic boundaries. In this way, the subject's development from nature to culture, from symbiotic unity to individuation, is inevitably implicated in language and the threat of castration. For Lacan, castration is clearly not a physical emasculation but the metaphorical representation of the trauma of loss, the separation from the mother, the acknowledgment of difference and individuation, experienced by the female child as well as the male. From this point the Phallus is forever a metaphor, a "phallic signifier" in the Symbolic register, rather than the penis, clitoris, or genitalia as a whole.

Lacan also draws on the modern linguistic notion of language as both langue, or "linguistic and informational meaning," from the conscious, and parole, or "truth value meaning," from the unconscious. The former is associated with the Law and the Name-of-the-Father, with culture and reason, with metaphor and the Symbolic; the latter, with Desire and the mother, with nature, with metonymy and the Imaginary. Thus, the conscious and unconscious cannot be separated; both are involved in an inevitable interchange. The conscious, as it is implicated in language, represents the repressed text of the unconscious. Since the unconscious is structured like a language, and metaphor is the means by which a signifier replaces another signifier repressed beneath the bar separating off the unconscious, metaphor both indicates that repression and the possibility for the language of the unconscious to "cross the bar," surfacing veiled within the conscious.
The Oedipal stage, then, for Lacan is the male or female infant, submitting its sexuality to the Name-of-the-Father as the Symbolic order requires accession to language and individuation. Rather being innate, gender is the result of an alignment with sameness -- the mother, primary Desire, the female -- or with difference -- the Law of the Name-of-the-Father, the male. A subject assumes maleness or femaleness by identifying or not identifying with the phallic signifier. The father stands for the Symbolic order mediating between the Imaginary, associated with the mother, and the Real. The biological father is the presence signifying the effects of the Real, while the mother is the first real Other, a signifier of primordial unconscious.

Ellie Ragland-Sullivan proceeds from her reading of Lacan to speculate on the effects of contemporary research on the shaping of gender from the completion of the mirror stage to the age of five. As we now know, concrete and verbal functions are the province of the left hemisphere of the brain, while abstract and spatial functions are the province of the right. The "lateralizing," or specializing, of these left-brain, right-brain functions is not completed, however, until the subject is five, the very age at which "grammar is acquired and a primary sexual identity fixed" (291). In this way, identification with the natural, with the male principle, structures the left brain as concrete and verbal, while identification with the female principle and a movement away from loss, structures the right brain as the result of the association with the abstract phallic signifier. Thus, during these years, gender is coming into being physiologically as the hemispheres of the brain are being specialized as more "female," i.e., concrete and verbal, or "male," i.e., abstract and spatial. Can this hypothesis help to explain, Ragland-Sullivan speculates, the concrete and verbal tendencies of men who frequently identify themselves with their mothers rather than their lower-class (and often absent) fathers?

Ellie Ragland-Sullivan's provocative question about gender orientations of lower-class sons who identify themselves with their mothers that opens the text of Sons and Lovers. Paul Morel becomes the focal consciousness of the narrative only belatedly, after an extensive description of his parents' courtship and marriage. Dominant in the descriptions of the courting parents are the "erotic organs" of the voice and eye. It is through Gertrude's eyes that Walter is introduced with his "wavy black hair," "vigorous black beard," his "ruddy" cheeks, and "red, moist mouth," the latter noticeable because "he laughed so often and so heartily" (17). Through repetition, the narrative stresses how she "watched him, fascinated." Other than perhaps "her blue eyes . . . very straight, honest and searching," she is not described as she appeared in his eyes. He is "melted away before her," not because of her physical appearance but because she speaks "with a southern pronunciation and a purity of English which thrilled him to hear." From the beginning, it is her voice which "fascinates" him, while it is the "dusky golden softness of this man's sensuous flame of life" which fascinates her eyes. Although he initiates their relationship by inviting her to dance, it is she who pursues him visually, her eyes ensnared by his beauty -- and inversion of the male gaze -- while he is fascinated by her voice and the power of language. Years later, when Paul as a young man experiences "strife in love," the narrator allows him to view his father's half-naked body through his mother's still-passionate gaze and to complain to Miriam that she lacks Mrs. Morel's response of fascinated looking. Thus, even before Paul is born, we are introduced to his parents as inversions of conventional gender associations -- she is the fascinating speaker, and he, the sensuous object of her fascinated gaze.

The infancies of the Morel children are notably disparate. William's infancy is memorable for the episode of his father's shearing the golden locks which have ensnared his mother's loving gaze. One can only wonder at the effect on William of this intrusive, prohibiting father holding those shears like the sword of the archangel Michael casting him out from the Eden of harmony with the mother's body, especially in conjunction with the mother's rare sobbing as she buries her face in his shorn hair. The scene seems almost a parody of popularized Freudian "castration." At the same time, it foregrounds the particularly Lacanian notion of castration, since William at a year old cannot conceivably wish to remove his father as a rival in order to appropriate his mother sexually. On the other hand, we can conceive of a pre-conscious but sentient subject who experiences this threat to the jouissance, the sheer physical ecstasy of connection with the mother's body. Much as she will eventually claim to have been silly, admitting that William's hair would have needed cutting anyway, she remembers the event for the rest of her life, "as one in which she suffered the most intensely." The birth of Annie, the next Morel child, is not even "announced": she is first referred to in this pre-Paul retrospective when William is old enough to swim
naked in the “dipping hole” and Annie to play under the hedge. It is as though Annie materializes like the adult Athena from the forehead of Zeus. Paul's infancy, on the other hand, is "special" -- even pre-natally.

The “primal scene” of Paul's being is the famous moonlight-and-lilies episode, an aftermath of his parents' row when the drunken Walter shuts Gertrude out in the garden. Appropriately, the reader learns of her pregnancy only after she has been ejected from her husband's house. Paul "boiled within her." Granted this "boiling" takes place in the context of the "shock to her inflamed soul," "seared with passion" and subjected to the cold shower of "great white light." Still, the narrative allows this subject-to-be—Paul the experience of a world beyond the womb, as that phenomenal world has an impact on the mother's body -- a body not yet different from its own. The mother "lost herself awhile. She did not know what she thought. Except for a slight feeling of sickness, and her consciousness in the child, her self melted out like scent into the shiny, pale air." Eventually, "the child, too, melted in her in the mixing-pot of moonlight, and she rested with the hills and lilies and houses, all swum together in a kind of swoon" (34). In this way, the narrative offers an attempt to recover the experience of jouissance, resulting from a memory of limitless joy in the paradise lost of the subject's harmony with the body of the mother. Nowhere in literature does one find such a transposition of that jouissance from infancy back to its pre-natal antecedent. In that "swoon" from which "she came to herself" again, Gertrude remembers her own unnamed mother whom she loved "best of all," the "gentle, humorous, kindly-soul mother" toward whom Gertrude's father was "overbearing."

With Paul, Mrs. Morel has recuperated the joyful connection with her own mother, as that loss is replicated in her joy of intense connectedness with him. In the key scene of her holding Paul up to the sun, his heavenly father, Gertrude "felt as if the navel string that had connected its frail little body with hers had not been broken. A wave of hot love went over her to the infant. She held it close to her face and breast" (51). What follows seems straight from Lacan: "Its clear, knowing eyes gave her pain and fear. Did it know all about her? When it lay under her heart, had it been listening then? Was there a reproach in the look?” (51). Yes, we are encouraged to answer these rhetorical questions: the pre-natal Paul did, indeed, listen under her heart, and after birth as well, to the wash of auditory images from without. But even more appropriately, Mrs. Morel's consciousness marks the presence of the gaze of her infant's "knowing eyes." The text foregrounds in the clearest manner the centrality of the Lacanian gaze in the mother-infant relationship: "Its deep blue eyes, always looking up at her unblinking, seemed to draw her innermost thoughts out of her" (50-51). That gaze has already been able to read her as co-extensive with the infant subject's being, to know a jouissance that it will ultimately lose and seek futilely to recuperate in all later relationships. It is at this point that she thrusts him up toward the sun, as if it were her infant's true progenitor, mimicking some primitive ritual in which the newborn's father introduces it to the cosmos. She names the subject, as a forestalling of the later Oedipal scene in which the Name-of-the-Father will initiate the subject into individuation and subjectivity with the prohibitory Nom/non of movement into the Symbolic register of language.

This scene ends with a counterpart to the pre-natal moonlight-and-lilies scene. The dispute between the Morels ends in Walter's flinging a drawer at Gertrude and wounding her brow. The blood drips first into Paul's shawl, and then into his "fragile, glistening hair." Walter watches "fascinated" while "his manhood broke" (55). The focus on his "fascinated" gaze at the blood dripping into Paul's hair re-inscribes the earlier scene of William's hair-clipping. Once again, well before the Lacanian "castration" scene in which the subject is forced to acknowledge the Name/No-of-the-Father and thereby be initiated into the Symbolic register of language and culture, Walter has proved to be ineffectual in fulfilling that function.

The engendering of language foregrounds the parents' conflict. It is through verbal impotence rather than drunken violence that the father breaks his manhood. Gertrude might have felt sorry for him if he had apologized. She expects him to fulfill his responsibility as the Law of the Name-of-the-Father, to be a master of language, but he cannot: "He had hurt himself most. And he was the more damaged, because he would never say a word to her, or express his sorrow" (55). His gestures, action, even his physical bearing may "express his sorrow," but she insists upon representation of meaning in language, in the signifiers associated with her own father, and the Name-of-the-Father. "And so he broke himself," (56). Appropriately, for our concern with gender and language, Paul will represent his own accession to masculinity in the "baptism of fire in passion" in the dialect of his father.
At this point, however, the mother controls the language in the household. When Morel comes down from the bedroom to Sunday tea, he eats in a silence that shuts him out from his family. Literally and figuratively, the mother and children speak another language. As the dialogue in the text indicates, Morel speaks the broad Midlands dialect, while the children are learning their mother's tongue, the Queen's English. Several days later, when Morel compounds his alienation by getting caught "stealing" from his wife's purse and threatens to abandon the family, William uses the most "proper English" to ask, "What shall we do?" When Morel returns, he tells his wife: "You may thank your stars I've come back tonight," and as the narrator indicates he was "trying to be impressive" (60). In this way, Gertrude confirms her mastery through the control of language, coercing Morel into adopting her tongue to be "impressive." Paul may be an infant, but these auditory images, and perhaps the sensations and feelings associated with them, have begun to inscribe themselves in the text of his unconscious.

Central to that text is the bilingual context of the Morel home. From infancy Paul has "heard" the language of his father's dialect and parole of his mother even before he could consciously distinguish what the signifiers meant. He has heard William and Annie using standard English. Because Lawrence is aware that his audience is used to reading texts in the dominant dialect, the text foregrounds Walter's language, indeed to such an extent that when he struggles to be "impressive" verbally we hear the difference. We are insistently reminded of the children's approximation of standard English until they launch out into their father's world outside the home. A case in point is Gertrude's defense of William against the mother of a schoolmate with whom he has been scuffling. In contrast to Mrs. Anthony's dialect, reminiscent of Walter's, Mrs. Morel's tongue allows her to enjoy mastery over those who are "beneath" her. The struggle for power in the family, as in Lawrence's culture, represents itself in part as difference in dialects:

"What!" cried Mrs. Morel, panting with rage. "You shall not touch him for her telling, you shall not!"

"Shonna I?" shouted Morel. "Shonna I?

..."

"Only dare!" she said in a loud, ringing voice. "Only dare, milord,
to lay a finger on that child! You'll regret it for ever." (68)

Tangential as this concern with the young life of William may seem, it is not, since he is Paul's forerunner and these battles are being pre-fought for the younger son.

Unlike William who can negotiate the linguistic realms of both parents, Paul functions with great difficulty in the world of his father. Perhaps the best example of that difficulty is the scene of anguish and humiliation when Paul collects his father's "pay" and is gently teased by the men who fault his grasp of arithmetic. When Paul goes home "glowering" to tell his mother that he will never go again, he accuses the men of being "hateful, and common," focusing upon their language. Mr. Braithwaite drops his "h's, and Mr. Winterbottom says, "You was" (97). In this way, Paul acknowledges the effects of inversions of Lacan's notions of the mother and the Name-of-the-Father. "Proper English" is associated consistently with the mother's tongue, as she learned her father's. It is his mother who speaks with the authority of patriarchy, not his father. In the hierarchy of dialects, the Queen's English is privileged. Walter's dialect, then, is "feminized" by its position of powerlessness: it is speech marginalized by the "proper" dialect spoken by the middle and upper classes, a written language.

The scene is repeated on Paul's first day of work when he must confront new figures of male authority alone this time, without the comfort of even his mother's submissive presence. In addition to Jordan, he must deal with Pappleworth, the chief of the Spiral department, who ridicules him for his "execrable handwriting." Like the men in the cashier's office where he collects his father's earnings, Jordan and Pappleworth lambent the deficiencies of modern education: "Lads learn nothing nowadays, but how to recite poetry and play the fiddle" (132). Pappleworth embarrasses Paul by asking him yet another time, "Let's see, what's your name?" The narrator adds: "It's curious that children suffer so much at having to
pronounce their own names.” A child like Paul suffers because in supplying his name to these embodiments of the Name-of-the-Father he acknowledges their hegemony over the Symbolic. His only relief from that embarrassment once again is gloating to remind himself that Jordan is lacking as a gentleman: "he spoke bad English" (132).

These issues of gender and language come together in the memorable scene in Clifton Grove. As has been so frequently noted, Paul lapses for the first time into his father's dialect, perhaps as an acknowledgment of the Law of the Name-of-the-Father. He begins with merely a shade of his father's language -- "Why cost look so heavy?" -- but moves to " Yea, the does! Dunna thee worrit,' he implored caressing" (356; emphasis added). Tellingly, he later says nothing until they have completed their fifteen-minute climb to top of the riverbank, returning to his mother's tongue "Now we're back at the ordinary level" (356).

When Paul's "baptism of fire in passion" comes in the scene of the peewits, the narrative breaks out of its conventional realism and offers a foretaste of Lawrence's technique in The Rainbow. The narrator struggles to move beneath the surface of consciousness into a realm of desire suggestive of the garden scene in which the unborn Paul "boils" in Gertrude's womb. Indeed, one senses that this realm outside consciousness parallels the lost jouissance of infant and mother: "The naked hunger and inevitability of his loving her [Clara], something strong and blind and ruthless in its primitiveness, made the hour terrible to her" (397). "When he came to," Paul's consciousness is allowed the language to translate this baptism into the metaphors of immersion in the life force, to recognize "in their meeting the thrust of the manifold grass stems, the cry of the peewit, the wheel of the stars" (398).

Admittedly, the language here is the narrator's, not Paul's; its function, however, is to provide equivalents for the empowerment of metaphoricity, the sense of Paul's coming to consciousness as an acknowledgment of the Law of the Name-of-the-Father. Paul must recognize both the irrevocable loss of jouissance -- the joyful, preconscious harmony with the mother's body -- and the inevitable movement into the symbolic register of language. The passage is crucial because its central metaphors are repeated in the novel's ambivalent ending:

To know their own nothingness, to know the tremendous living flood
which carried them always, gave them rest within themselves. If
so great a magnificent power could overwhelm them, identify them
altogether with itself, so that they knew they were only grains in
the tremendous heave that lifted every grass-blade its little height,
and every tree, and living thing, then why fret about
themselves.... (398)

Thus, it is only through metaphor that Paul can be empowered.

Riding the train back to town after having abandoned his relationships with first Clara and then Miriam, Paul is overwhelmed by the immense darkness: "In the country all was dead still. Little stars shone high up; little stars spread far away in the floodwaters, . . . the vastness and terror of the immense night" (464). He feels like a "tiny upright speck of flesh, less than an ear of wheat lost in the field," a "spark" being pressed into extinction. The body of the mother, now forever relinquished, equates here with the ultimate castration, the total alienation of the subject for the first time. At the same time, however, the narrative is foregrounding the metaphors of the life force, metaphors associated with Walter Morel -- the "flame of life" -- and the Paul who came through the baptism of fire in passion -- the kernel of wheat and the flood.

These metaphors are central to Paul's entry into the symbolic register, into language and culture. Through these metaphors, the narrative offers us Paul's final accession to the realm of the Name-of-the-Father, the movement from darkness into "the faintly humming' glowing town." Paul moves finally from the text of
the unconscious associated with the mother to the empowerment of metaphor associated with the Name-of-the-Father.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Abstract:
D.H. Lawrence's 'Sons and Lovers' is more appropriately approached through Jacques Lacan's new psychoanalytic criticism than through Sigmund Freud's theories. Lacan's approach explores the interactions between subjects, the narrative and the intersubjectivity rather than focusing on analyzing the characters psychoanalytically. This more broad approach reveals the links between gender and language with Mother being associated with highbrow English and Father with lowbrow. Paul, the main character, must abandon his mother's world to enter the world of male authority.

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