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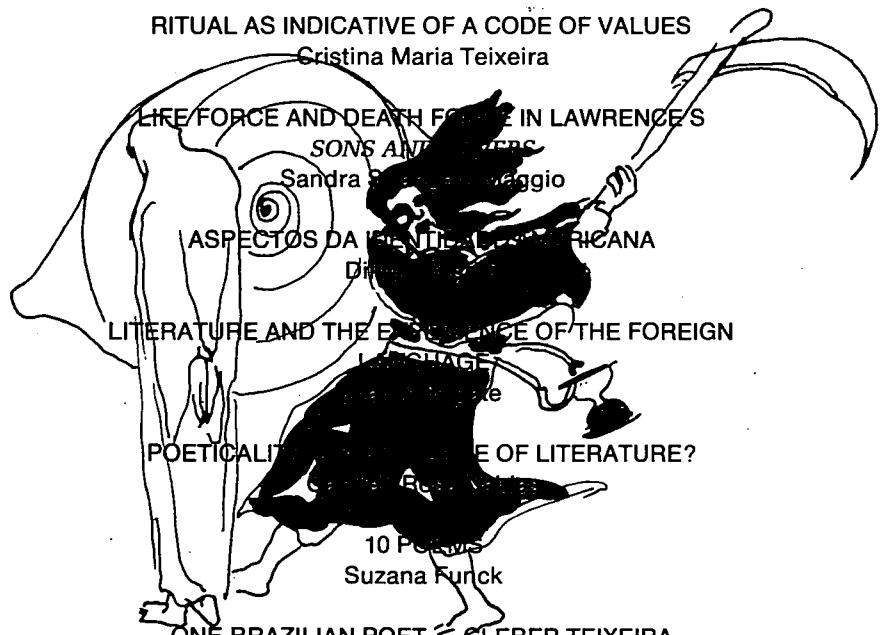
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life force and death force in  
lawrence's *sons and lovers*

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## LIFE FORCE AND DEATH FORCE IN LAWRENCE'S SONS AND LOVERS

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Frieda Lawrence first introduced her husband to the work of Sigmund Freud when the last draft of Sons and Lovers was being finished. That's why critics, even now, wonder about the extent of the influence Freudian theories might have had upon the novel. Anyway, the fact remains that Lawrence has his own views of the unconscious (which he states in essays such as 'Fantasia of the Unconscious' and 'Psychoanalysis of the Unconscious')<sup>1</sup>, and that he and Freud follow, ultimately, the same path. Sons and Lovers is where they meet, one with theoretic explanations, the other with the empirical demonstration.

Freud, like Klages, talks about the three dimensions of the adult psyche — id, ego and superego — and about the processes individuals must go through to deal with their own contradictions. On one hand there is this LIFE FORCE (known as Libido, or Eros Platonicus) demanding that all instincts be satisfied. On the other, we have a system of moral attitudes, social rules or even parental conscience, working as a mechanism of self-repression. It is potentially a DEATH FORCE (Thanatos instinct) because it conveys a sense of guilt which, if overdeveloped, leads people into a self-destructive attitude.

Our goal in this essay, thus, is to take a look at three characters in Sons and Lovers (namely Gertrude, William and Paul Morel) and at the polarized forces of DEATH and LIFE which determine their behavior and attitude towards life.

### I. MRS. MOREL AND HER SEARCH FOR SALVATION

Gertrude Morel is one of those moving characters we

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find now and then in Literature. There are those who like her and those who don't. In fact, people often blame and understand her at the same time. The main trait which enables her to fight for what she wants is vitality. A practical woman, as soon as one door is closed she strives for another way out, survival in a hostile environment is not enough for her: her love for life is great, and she longs for self-satisfaction rather than for anything else. In this quest she becomes selfish and, being far stronger than the others, ends up by hurting those who live with her. Though the processes which determine her behavior are simple, the conflicts they are going to generate are quite complex, and all derive from her desperate quest for self-completion.

When she first meets the man who is going to be her husband, Gertrude Coppard is a healthy young girl who has been raised among stern Puritans. The one man she knows intimately is her father, who "is proud in his bearing, handsome, and rather bitter," and who directs his sympathies to the apostle Paul, who "ignored all sensuous pleasure". She had fallen in love with a young man, John Field, who gave her a Bible instead of kisses. He was weak and dependent, submitting always to his father's will. Such was the life she led up to the day she went to a party and met Walter Morel. She immediately realizes she is in the presence of something new. He is very attractive, has a beautiful voice, is warm and friendly. This sensuous man brings the promise of things she is not used to. There is nothing masochistic in the interest she feels in him. Actually, she means to add another dimension to her life. Living in a world of ideas, she wants to develop also her instincts and emotions. And she thinks that's what will happen if she marries Walter Morel. The young man, who is a miner, is also impressed by the 'lady' he sees in her and, in the rough English he is used to speaking, invites her to visit him at the pits. In his essay 'Counterfeit Loves'<sup>2</sup> Mark Spilka points that, though she never accepts the invita-

tion literally, through marriage she descends into a world of darkness (as she goes to live with him near Hell Row, at the Bottoms.) Soon she realizes that, except for sexual attraction, they don't have much in common. Since they belong to different social classes, their tastes differ, and also their ideas about money and personal relations. Now she misses the world of her father, which is also HER world, and feels uneasy by the side of this irresponsible young man who doesn't take life seriously. Had their problem been only the fact that they belong to different spheres she could have tried to save her marriage. But their values are also incongruent. She is unable to accept that he is different from her father, and forgets that this is the very reason why she has first wanted him, some time ago. Thus, "in seeking to make him better than he could be she destroyed him."

George H. Ford traces a parallel between Gertrude's life and the Greek myth about Persephone in another essay, called 'The "S" curve: persephone to pluto'.<sup>3</sup> This young goddess has been taken into the kingdom of the dead by Hades. Her mother, desperate, asks Jupiter to send a messenger to rescue the girl. Hermes is chosen to perform this difficult task, but he finds out that Persephone is already in love with her husband. She is very sorry that Hades has to live in such a terrible place of darkness. Therefore, she agrees to live half of the year in the world she belongs to, and the other half with the man she loves. Unfortunately, poor Gertrude is not offered so comfortable a solution. Unlike what happens to Persephone (or to those English characters in E.M. Forster who descend to Italy to have stormy and sublime temporary love affairs) Mrs. Morel has no Hermes to restore her to the pleasant lands of Middle Class. She feels unhappy and puts all the blame on her husband, turning him into her first victim. Because she resents him, she excludes him from her life and, afterwards, from the lives of her children. She makes him feel he doesn't belong to the group. Then, when he starts behaving nastily

and grows to like public houses better than his own home, she feels justified in her belief that he is not worth her respect.\*

Walter Morel is a simple man, totally open to life and, therefore, easily destroyed. Through a process of 'moral shrinking' he loses that primitive warmth and, from this moment on, his wife both pities and despises him. She realizes she is alone and suffers, but she is not going to be defeated so easily. Since she has to live in 'hell', she decides to make it as comfortable as possible. She clings to nature and flowers. She still has her children. And through them she is going to return, one day, to the world of her father. William, the first-born, is chosen as her young 'Hermes', the one in charge of restoring her to the middle class, that paradise where sober clerks stroll, dignified and dressed in white collars. Even if he is bound to die of erysipelas.

## II. WILLIAM MOREL

Since his early childhood William has been divided between the desire to have fun (an impulse at once egotistical and healthful, which is natural to all children) and an immense love for his mother, that fills him with pride and admiration. These two emotions seem to go one against the other, to the extent that he cannot enjoy himself alone without feeling guilt. This can be seen when he is at the wakes with her. Mrs. Morel has to leave early in order to make dinner,

And she went slowly with her girl, whilst her son stood watching her, cut to the heart to let her go, and yet unable to leave the wakes. (...)

At about half-past six her son came home, tired now, rather pale, and somewhat wretched.

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\* Lawrence treats this character with sympathy and understanding. Yet, if his mind is with Walter Morel, his heart is with Gertrude.

He was miserable, though he did not know it, because he had let her go alone. Since she had gone, he had not enjoyed his wakes.

This is William's dilemma. He is determined enough to demand his share in life; but when he gets it he is too tired to feel 'happy' and enjoy it. As he comes from the wakes he is sad and sick. This is the beginning of a long struggle to rebel against the navel cord which proves so hard to cut.

As he grows older William feels suffocated. His mother who doesn't intend to give up her only passport to happiness, starts behaving aggressively with his girlfriends. More than that, the Oedipal son/lover is unable to get rid of this feeling of responsibility towards his mother. William seems to sense his problems rather than to rationalize about them, and his fight for life is a brave one.

As a first step towards independence he finds some friends and starts going to parties. Like his father, he dances well and is successful with girls. Now he is a man, and much stronger. Still, the emotion he felt at the wakes remains. Once he goes to a fancy dress ball against his mother's will, when

She was rather pale, and her face was close and hard. She was afraid of her son's going the same way as his father. He hesitated a moment, and his heart stood still with anxiety. Then he caught sight of the Highland bonnet with its ribbons.

Such a contrast, the ribbons in the bonnet and that feeling in his heart! The passage goes on with "He picked it up gleefully, forgetting her." But why his heart insists on beating out of compass whenever he goes against her is the question he is unable to answer.

After that William tries living in London and, paradoxically, seems to be even closer to her. He writes a lot and comes home whenever he is able to, bringing her presents. It is in London that he meets Gypsy for the first

time, a sweet and absent-minded coquette to whom he gets engaged.

What happens with William is a repetition of his mother's story. Gypsy is very different from Mrs. Morel, and this makes him believe that, through her, he will be freed from Gertrude's influence. When he realizes the marriage is bound to be a failure it is too late, and he feels he's under the moral obligation of remaining with her. More guilt and self-reproach is added to his load, and he starts his final drift towards death. He is not as strong as his mother and gives in to melancholic thoughts. William stops caring about his health, catches pneumonia and dies, within a few weeks, in his mother's arms.

### III. PAUL MOREL

If William is the son of Walter and Gertrude Morel, Paul is a fatherless child. This has been asserted in the symbolic scene where, after a quarrel with her husband, Mrs. Morel goes to the garden and makes her first alliance with her son, in an auto-erotic scene where she and the unborn baby partake in a feeling of ecstasy, a trance of excessive delight as they seem to melt in a sea of lilies and moonlight

This link with his mother is so deep as to determine his behavior towards life, and has much to do with the impulse which, since he is a baby, seems to push him towards death. While he is a child this impulse is unconscious, though it can be seen in the stern lines on his brow, or in the sudden fits of crying, when he is about three years old. The quarrels provoked by his father and the feeling that his mother loves William better than she loves him make Paul resent the two only men he knows, his father and his brother.

The boy is raised among women, to the point where he even acquires a feminine perception of things — he is intimidated by people who talk or behave in a coarse way,



loves flowers and is very sensitive. When he is a small boy, he accidentally breaks Arabela, his sister's doll. Two days afterwards he still feels bad, and proposes a sacrifice of the dead doll's body. All the pleasure he has as he watches the toy burning, and when he smashes what is left with stones, demonstrate the beginning of misogyny in him. In a sort of reflexive movement he blames himself because he has caused his sister to suffer, and blames her because if she did not exist he would not feel unhappy now. Burning the doll is also a 'masculine protest', where he punishes women for all the pressures they exert on him.

As a child Paul is rather weak. Whenever he feels ill, he is soothed by the idea that his mother is going to take care of him. He will lie on the sofa and, for some days, will be William who is going to be second-best. His love for Mrs. Morel grows to such an extent that he likes to think he is her little boy-friend, the "knight who wears her favor in the battle." This makes him jealous of his father

Paul hated his father. As a young boy he had a fervent private religion.

'Make him stop drinking', he prayed every night. 'Lord let my father die', he prayed very often. 'Let him not be killed at pit', he prayed when, after tea, the father did not come from work.

If his father stopped drinking, maybe they would have more peaceful moments at home; if his father died they would be able to be happy. On the other hand, if this happened, Paul would feel responsible because he would have wished him to die.

Paul is weaker than William, and his problems are more complex than his brother's. Still, it is he who survives. His trajectory is the opposite of his brother's: beginning on the edge of death, he starts a long and painful journey towards life. He realizes his problems and, because he is intelligent, sensitive and hard-minded, tries patiently to solve them.

His mother teaches him to love nature, flowers and the

sun. He also starts to paint, and finds a real pleasure in art. Though weak, he is full of vivacity. After his brother's death he becomes his mother's favorite and, a little after that, he becomes friends with Miriam Leivers and her family. His interest in life and in himself is awakened. His health grows stronger.

By this time he has already the feeling that there is something unnatural in his relation with his mother. He knows he has to put an end to this, and trusts Miriam to help him in the task.

Mrs. Morel doesn't like Miriam, though both women have much in common. They are very romantic and extremely shy, living proudly in a world of their own — and this, together with their love for nature, is what they have in common with Paul. Miriam, always dreaming of her books, believes she's a princess condemned to live among common people who treat her as if she were a swine-girl. Gertrude is the Burgeois Queen who has to live among proletarians. They love Paul so much because he is the only person who sees them as they think they are.

Paul feels attracted to Miriam because she is like his mother. He likes her very much, and she soon falls in love with him. Yet, something prevents him from behaving like a man. The first reason is that, unconsciously, he feels he is married to his mother. On one hand, he cannot betray her with another woman; on the other, there is his remorse for feeling this about her. For him the idea of sex is related to sin. And if Miriam represents for him his mother when young, whatever he feels for her is going to be incestuous. As a result, he builds for Miriam the same pedestal he has created for his mother and both women stand there, like saints, unapproachable.

Since he believes he is so open-minded, Paul would never accept the fact that it is him who avoids a closer contact with the girl. It is easier to think that the

problem is in Miriam and in her religious background. She seems so spiritual that he doesn't dare to think of her as a woman.

Paul also exaggerates the fact that Miriam is afraid. He makes fun of her because she doesn't want to feed the fowls, or because she doesn't go high and fast in the swing. He interprets her actions as 'lack of courage', when he should see his own recklessness as an evidence of self-destructive instincts. One of the reasons for Paul's death wish is that, since all sexual pleasure is associated with incest, it is also associated with punishment. Actually he can't separate the notions of pleasure and pain. As he grows older he is more and more seduced by the idea of death, when you just have to let yourself go, with no effort. Or of how delightful it would be to see all women — his mother — suffer because he is dead.

He cannot hate his mother; therefore, he also projects in Miriam Gertrude's excessive possessiveness. He believes that one of the reasons why he doesn't fall in love with Miriam is the fact that she 'wants to take the soul out of him.' But his soul has been taken out of him by his mother, in a garden, even before he was born.

Very often Paul has been angry with Miriam because she makes him go against his mother. He has to defy Mrs. Morel — and also his sister — in order to go on being her friend. There are frequent arguments because he arrives home late, and several other small things. But this helps him get a little less dependent on his mother.

When finally they become lovers, Paul cannot help the feeling that Miriam is merely 'conforming' to his will. He is not at ease, and, again, blames her for the failure. He thinks that her fear is the thing which makes him nervous, and this allegation protects his self-image.

By this time Gertrude is already conscious of the melancholy state of her son, and feels responsible for it.

But they never talk about that until he tells her he doesn't care about being happy. His one concern is to remain alive. "At this rate she knew he would not live. He had that poignant carelessness about himself, his own suffering, his own life, which is a form of slow suicide." She has already seen it happen with William, and is scared. Now, for the first time, Mrs. Morel is ready to give. She wants her son to live, and is even ready to welcome Miriam in her house. From now on she is not going to be an obstacle anymore. Yet, Paul's problems are too complex to be erased by the mere withdrawal of their cause.

Now that he has made love to Miriam he feels he has to marry her. Yet he doesn't want to, for her image is linked for him to a period of much strain, shame and bad memories. Like William, he has to make his choice. Either he marries her in order not to let her down or he goes on with his quest for manhood. Miriam herself acknowledges he is not ready for marriage, though she hopes he is going to return someday.

Paul knows what he is doing as he leaves Miriam. He knows he is hurting her deeply. He feels he is behaving like a coward and leaving her in a bad moment. But he also knows that this is going to be the best solution for both of them. Paul has taken the road William did not try, and avoided the one that led his brother into death.

Miriam has helped him climb some steps towards independence, and now he is ready to look for a real sexual initiation. This is linked, in his inner self, with the search for the absent figure of the father, and both Clara and her husband, Baxter Dawes, are going to help him.

Clara is far more experienced than he is, and even the fact that she is older and taller conveys the idea of protection and dependence. Nevertheless, Paul associates her with his father, rather than with his mother, because both Clara and Walter Morel are very sensuous. From the

first time they meet, that side of him lacking sexual identification realizes the element of masculinity in her. He has already felt the same about her husband, "a big, well-set man, also striking to look at, and handsome." Paul can't help staring at him. Baxter grows uneasy and asks, "What are you looking at?" when he meets what the narrator calls "the deliberate gaze of an artist on Paul's face."

Paul has always lived among women, and openly resents the "man's world." He is against the image of his father and the implications it carries: Walter Morel is associated with the ideas of fire and darkness, and is also compared to Vulcan, Venus' lover, symbol of manhood. And if his father represents the manly condition he searches for, then he has to accept him in order to leap from adolescence into manhood. More than that, if he wants to become a man he will have to regard his mother as a simple woman, and her husband as his father. He is not able to love Walter Morel because he knows him too well. But through Clara and Baxter he can abstract the hypothetical image of the Father/Man/Morel which he needs so badly.

When he starts meeting Clara, he sees her as the "suffragette", the free woman who is not going to 'take the soul out of him', so that spiritually he can still belong to his mother. With her he wants to assert his masculinity and, following the one model he knows, takes to behaving like his father. Now he loves darkness and, in moments of passion, talks in the old miner's fashion. But the Puritan in him still associates sex with the ideas of sin and dirt. One day he takes Clara down sordid Wilford Road to the Trent. Then he invites her to go down to the river, where they have their moment of passion. Down by the river — and also down at the level of instinctive emotions — he "thee's" her, tender and warm. But as they go back to the ordinary level, his first reaction is to clean her shoes and make her fit for "respectable folk". Then he takes the red mud off his boots also, and asks, looking for comfort, "Not sinners, are we?"

Baxter Dawes has all the qualities connected with Paul's conception of the father. Manly and vigorous, he also stands in the way between Paul and the woman he wants. Therefore, if Paul gives Clara back to her husband, in a way he will be also giving his mother to his father and cutting the Oedipal relation that hinders his independence. That's why, when talking to Clara about her husband, he is actually justifying his father's behavior to himself. "Weren't you horrid with him?", he asks her, "Didn't you do something that knocked him to pieces?" She wonders what she could have done that was strong enough to knock a man to pieces. "Making him feel as if he were nothing", Paul suggests.

By the end of the novel Paul — now he is called simply 'Morel', like his father — returns Clara to her husband. Gertrude has died, and her son is past the moment of definitive choice. He has considered, quite rationally, the idea of committing suicide, but his yearning for life is stronger.

But no, he would not give in. Turning sharply, he walked towards the city's gold phosphorescence. His fists were shut, his mouth set fast. He would not take that direction, to the darkness, to follow her. He walked towards the faintly humming, glowing town, quickly.

He is not a complete man yet, nor are old scars going to disappear. But he is not that sick and self-destructive child any longer. Morel is a strong and hard-minded man, as determined as his mother has ever been, who is not going to give up his quest at all.

NOTES ON THE TEXT

<sup>1</sup>LAWRENCE, D.H. Fantasia of the Unconscious/Psychoanalysis of the Unconscious. Penguin, Middlesex, 1974.

<sup>2</sup>SILKA, Mark. 'Counterfeit Loves' IN: FARR, Judith(ed.) Twentieth Century Interpretations of SONS AND LOVERS. Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1970.

<sup>3</sup>FORD, George. 'The "S" Curve: Persephone to Pluto'. IN: FARR, Judith (ed.) Twentieth Century Interpretations of SONS AND LOVERS. Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1970.