A Love That Kills

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In the semiautobiographical novel *Sons and Lovers*, originally published in 1913, written by D. H. Lawrence, a man named Paul Morel is the central focus of the book. Paul Morel is based on Lawrence himself and the characters in his book are people that existed in his real life, only with different names. Although this book does not tell the exact truth, it follows Lawrence’s life pretty closely. The book tells the story of Paul Morel’s life and how he grew up as the brother of three other siblings and the son of Gertrude and Walter Morel. Paul is seen exploring his life and the reader watches him grow up under the watchful eye of his mother. However, this watchful mother is more of an influence than just any other mother. In *Sons and Lovers*, Paul Morel has an Oedipal relationship with his mother, Gertrude, that prevents him from being truly happy in life, as evidence through the death of his brother, William, his relationship with Miriam Leivers, his relationship with Clara Dawes, and the ultimate death of his mother.

Before Paul was the apple of Gertrude’s eye, there was William, the eldest of the four children. Gertrude worshipped William because he was her handsome and talented son. She prided herself on his accomplishments in life, even after he left for London for a good job to help out the family. Paul was not like William in that Paul was a very frail child and shadowed his mother around. William took after his father physically while Paul took after his mother. While William is in London, news was received one night that he had become very ill because of a terrible sickness and after Gertrude made a trip to take care of him, he died from this sickness. This is a big moment for Paul’s life because after William’s death is when the reader sees Gertrude transfer her love from William to Paul. Paul was the next son after William. All of
Gertrude’s goals and wishes for William were put onto Paul, which was a great load for him to carry. She wanted to see Paul succeed in life for her sake, rather than his own. There is one scene in the book where Paul wins first prize for one of his art pieces and both Gertrude and Paul are excited by this. However, even though Gertrude never took part in the painting of this piece, she said that “we” won the prize. This simple “we” is where Gertrude inserts her own wishes and goals into Paul. Because she married under her own social class and did not get to have all that she really wanted out of life, she was living vicariously through her son, and even treating him like the husband she never got to have. “And I’ve never—you know, Paul—I’ve never had a husband—not really—“ (Lawrence 234). Gertrude is using Paul as a substitute for Walter because Walter is not the husband she wants him to be, and Paul lets her.

Another thing that his mother holds Paul back on is his intimate relationships with other women. His first real relationship was with a timid girl named Miriam Leivers, who he met on a farm that he and his mother frequented. Miriam was awkward, at best. Ronald P. Draper describes Miriam as “an extremely sensitive girl, she has been reduced by her mother’s mistaken high-mindedness to a semineurotic condition” (224). Miriam is extremely religious and finds so much passion in the simple things in life, and that really puzzles Paul because he does not think in the same way she does. Gertrude sees this religious passion and tells Paul that Miriam will suck the life right out of him and keep sucking until there is nothing left of him. “I can’t bear it. I could let another woman—but not her. She’d leave me no room, not a bit of room—“ (Lawrence 234). And, of course, this really affects the way that Paul starts to see Miriam because he thinks so highly of his mother. Paul and Miriam have a relationship that lasts for about eight years, on and off, and the whole time it is very strained because of his mother’s insecurities that Miriam will take him away. Another thing that strains their relationship is the fact that Miriam is
frightened of sex and that really puts a big wall between her and Paul (Draper 224). She just cannot bring herself to be physically intimate with him, but she is only a few times when she feels like she has to do so to keep him around.

The second love affair that Paul has is with Clara Dawes, the complete opposite of Miriam. Clara is a beautiful woman that Paul meets through Miriam, and he is instantly drawn to her animal magnetism. Perhaps one thing that drew him to her was that she was forbidden, being that she was married. However, she is separated from her husband. Clara is also a feminist and believes that women should have equal rights. I think that this really struck Paul as interesting. Clara, as opposed to Miriam, is a very sexual creature. She is not afraid of sex, like Miriam is, and Paul takes full advantage of this. Miriam sees that Clara can give him what she could not, and it really affects her and Paul’s relationship. Surprisingly, his mother actually likes Clara over Miriam, and this might be because Gertrude knows that Paul’s relationship with Clara is just sexual and that there is not much chance that Clara will take him away like Miriam would. Paul is pleased that Clara and his mother get along, but their relationship is strained and he knew it was bound to end some day.

And last, but not least, the thing that affects Paul the most is the death of his mother. At this point, Paul realizes that once his mother is gone that he will be set free. “. . . [Paul] cannot become fully son or lover until he has escaped from his mother’s possessive influence” (“Sons and Lovers”). What this is saying is that his strange relationship with his mother is holding him back from being a true son and a real lover to others besides her. However, he still loves his mother immensely and does not want to see her suffer at the end of her life from cancer. So, he gives her an overdose of morphine to quicken her death. This had to be the hardest thing that Paul had ever done. All at once, he shows compassion for his mother, as well as an
understanding that without her he will be free. At the end, once she has passed, he goes in for one last visit to his mother. “He bent and kissed her passionately. . . . Looking at her, he felt he could never, never let her go” (Lawrence 434). All of his life, she has been the one to hover over him, yet love him unconditionally. He has never known life without his mother’s opinion of how he should be. However, his mother has still prevailed. At this point, Paul is done with his relationship with Miriam. He is done trying to fix it. He realizes he can never marry her and that he can never give her what she really wants out of the relationship. Paul also sees that Clara is still in love with her husband and brings the two back together after a few altercations between him and Mr. Dawes. As well as knowing he cannot have a real relationship with a married woman, he also sees that he can never give Clara what she wants from their relationship and that she needs her husband.

Overall, it is very obvious Gertrude’s influence on Paul throughout the novel, and because this is a semiautobiographical novel the reader really gets a sense of what Lawrence went through with his own mother. “What Lawrence understands of himself becomes Paul. What Paul’s character reveals to us is a hypersensitive individual who relies on a strong bond with his mother to help him cope with an inhibited temperament that is his by nature” (Edwards). Lawrence had an Oedipal type of relationship with his mother, and he was very resistant to people’s readings of it under the Freudian influence. Even Frieda, one of Lawrence’s great loves, interpreted it in a Freudian way (Ingersoll 434). Paul’s Oedipal relationship with his mother really kept him from being truly happy as a young man because the two of them were too closely attached. He was both a son and a lover to his mother, which inhibited him from being happy.
Works Cited


