‘It is a great tragedy, and I tell you I’ve written a great book.’
D. H. Lawrence: ‘Sons and Lovers’

Andrew Harrison

Bibliographical Entry:

A Note on the Author

Andrew Harrison has taught at the universities of East Anglia, Nottingham and Warwick. He has published numerous articles on D. H. Lawrence, and he is the author of *D. H. Lawrence and Italian Futurism* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2003) and co-editor (with John Worthen) of a casebook of modern critical essays on *Sons and Lovers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). He is editor of the *Journal of D. H. Lawrence Studies*.

A Note on the Text


Acknowledgements

My account of the composition of *Sons and Lovers* is heavily indebted to the scholarly work of Helen and Carl Baron; their Introduction to the Cambridge Edition is an invaluable resource for anyone interested in the genesis and reception of the novel. Likewise, my understanding of Lawrence’s early career as an author has been shaped by the authoritative account of it provided in John Worthen’s *D. H. Lawrence: The Early Years 1885–1912* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); I strongly recommend this book to those readers who wish to understand the complex relationship between fiction and autobiography in *Sons and Lovers*. I am grateful to Charles Moseley for his very helpful and constructive comments on an early draft.
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Part 1. Introduction

Getting Started: D. H. Lawrence in 1910

D. H. Lawrence started work on the project which would produce *Sons and Lovers* in the autumn of 1910. At this time he had published just two short stories and three sequences of poems, but he had written a great deal and his career as a writer was beginning to take shape as his range of writing contacts widened. Since October 1908 he had been working as a teacher at Davidson Road School in Croydon: he hated the work, but it brought him financial independence and the location allowed him access to the publishing world of London. In June 1909 his childhood girlfriend, Jessie Chambers, had sent several of his poems to Ford Madox Hueffer (later Ford), the influential editor of a new journal called the *English Review*, which published work by (among others) Joseph Conrad, Henry James and H. G. Wells. To Lawrence’s delight, Hueffer was impressed with the work he saw and asked to see Lawrence at his London offices. Through Hueffer, Lawrence published poems in the journal, together with a short story entitled ‘Goose Fair’; he was also introduced to London literary circles. In December 1909 he sent the manuscript of his first novel (entitled ‘Nethermere’, later *The White Peacock*) to the publishing firm of William Heinemann, together with a supporting letter from Hueffer; it was accepted in January 1910 and would be published a year later, in January 1911. Between March and August 1910 he had also written the first full draft of a second novel entitled ‘The Saga of Siegmund’ (later *The Trespasser*), based on a diary kept by one of his teaching colleagues whose lover had committed suicide in August 1909. As he started the first draft of ‘Paul Morel’ (his initial title for *Sons and Lovers*), his second novel was under consideration with Heinemann.

These details underline the speed with which Lawrence’s literary career was launched, but the transition from teacher to professional writer was far from easy. Before he resigned his teaching post due to ill health in February 1912, Lawrence had to fit his writing around his busy work schedule. He had no experience of dealing with publishers and had little or no understanding of literary commerce. Without
an agent, he had to rely on the good will of literary editors like Hueffer (and later Edward Garnett, reader for the publishing company Duckworth) for advice on where and how to publish. In addition, the frankness with which he wrote of erotic subjects represented a serious risk to his saleability as a writer at this early stage in his career. Hueffer recognised his genius straight away, but he also recognised a rawness in his writing which would need to be addressed if he was to flourish in a literary marketplace which was largely dependent upon the strict middle-class codes of powerful circulating libraries like Mudies, Boots and W. H. Smiths.¹

‘Paul Morel’ was begun in response to Hueffer’s call for Lawrence to draw on his working-class background in Eastwood, Nottinghamshire, to produce an authentic novel of working-class life. ‘Nethermere’ and ‘The Saga of Siegmund’ had been consciously literary novels, set in surprisingly déclassé milieux in which daily life is saturated by the strains of high art. The atmosphere of ‘Nethermere’ owed much to the overblown aestheticism of the Decadents, while ‘The Saga of Siegmund’ was overlaid with Wagnerian and Schopenhauerian ideas of transcendence and of deterministic pessimism. It is perhaps inevitable that a displaced collier’s son should have laid claim to this highly literary cultural hinterland in his desire to strike out as a writer; on the other hand, ‘Paul Morel’ was to be a novel grounded not in literary aspiration but in his actual background and, as it progressed, in the very details of his family life and broader relationships.² He wrote that it would 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’ (18.x.1910).

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¹ Circulating libraries were operated by private businesses which charged a small fee for lending books. They were hugely popular with working-class and middle-class readers, and therefore exerted a powerful influence on the market for contemporary fiction. In 1912, the publisher William Heinemann told Lawrence that there was practically no market for fiction outside of these libraries; modern research has shown that, at the peak of their popularity, they could be responsible for 75% of a popular novel’s sales. The libraries were notoriously conservative in their adoption of new fiction titles, rejecting novels containing any suggestion of sexual impropriety; in disseminating reading material to a broad span of British society, then, they also acted as self-appointed moral guardians.

² Hueffer’s suggestion that Lawrence should focus on his working-class background may also account for the writing of realistic short stories like ‘Odour of Chrysanthemums’ and ‘Daughters of the Vicar’. Where early short stories like ‘A Prelude’ and ‘A Fragment of Stained Glass’ contain highly literary and mannered explorations of love and transgression, these later stories explore their themes through a thorough examination of particular social and class contexts.
The Composition of *Sons and Lovers*

‘Matilda’ and the College Notebook Plan

The novel took over two years to write and went through four drafts. In July 1910, several months before he began work on it, he was already experimenting with writing a novel based on his own family history. He wrote 48 pages of an untitled novel based on the reminiscences of his mother concerning the life of his great-great grandfather. This abandoned fragment has now been published under the title ‘Matilda’.¹

In August 1910 his mother fell gravely ill with the cancerous tumour which was to prove fatal four months later, in December. He visited her at weekends for several upsetting months, then nursed her full-time from 24 November until her death. It seems likely that a plan he wrote in his old college notebook for an early version of ‘Paul Morel’ dates from the period when he first learned of his mother’s illness. This plan shows that he had decided to write a novel in two parts dealing with aspects of his own early experience and that of his friends, but he was attempting to shuffle the experiences, embellishing them and shaping them into a significant fiction (each part, for example, as in the final version of *Sons and Lovers*, was to end with a character’s death).

The First and Second Drafts

Between October and December 1910 he wrote 100 pages of a first draft, which has subsequently been lost. After his mother’s death he understandably lost the desire to tackle a serious work of fiction, and it was not until March 1911 that he returned to the project, writing between then and July at least 355 pages of a new and separate manuscript before this, too, was abandoned. He sent part of this draft to his fiancée Louie Burrows for her correction in April 1911, and he sent the full, unfinished draft to Jessie Chambers for her comments in October. The second draft has recently been published by Cambridge University Press. It is a very different novel from *Sons and Lovers*; in it, a character named Arthur, the youngest member of the Morel family, is killed by his father, who throws a ‘steel’ (or knife sharpener) at him during a violent argument. The father is sent to prison and dies shortly after his release. The incident may seem unduly sensational, but Lawrence was drawing on the real-life case of his paternal uncle, Walter Lawrence, who killed his son in exactly the same circumstances in 1900.

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¹ *Matilda* is published as Appendix I in *D. H. Lawrence, Paul Morel*, ed. Helen Baron (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 143–60.
Jessie claimed (after Lawrence’s death) that she found the writing in this draft rather tired and forced. She suggested that Lawrence stick more closely to his immediate family history and include the tragic story of his elder brother, William Ernest, who died in London from erysipelas and pneumonia in October 1901 at the age of 23. The task of confronting the traumatic deaths of his brother and his mother, and transforming these incidents into art, must have seemed dreadful to Lawrence; he told Louie Burrows on 3 November 1911 that the thought of the novel weighed heavily upon him.

The Third Draft

The first complete version of the novel was written under the impetus of Jessie’s comments between November 1911 and June 1912. These seven months were transformative ones in Lawrence’s life: in mid-November 1911 he fell ill with double pneumonia; in February 1912 he broke off his engagement to Louie Burrows and resigned his teaching post under doctor’s orders; in March he met his future wife, Frieda Weekley (who was at this time married to her first husband), and in May he travelled with her to Germany, where she went to visit her family. If the second draft of the novel had been marred by the emotional fallout from his mother’s death, the third was shaped by the chasm that had grown between his old life as a grieving teacher trying to save enough money to marry on, and his new life abroad with Frieda as a fulfilled professional writer attempting to eke out a living for himself. In keeping closer to his own experiences, the third draft also cast a more detached and critical eye over Paul’s relationship with Miriam, a character whom Jessie Chambers knew to be her fictional counterpart. Lawrence asked Jessie to write down her memories of their childhood days in order to fuel his writing, but when she read the manuscript
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