The Symbolism of Names in *Sons and Lovers*

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D. H. LAWRENCE'S *SONS AND LOVERS* has been interpreted variously as an autobiographical Bildungsroman, as a novelistic working out of the Oedipal conflict, or as a theosophical treatise on sacred and profane love.[1] To be sure, the novel is highly autobiographical; Lawrence made little effort to disguise the characters, places, and events in *Sons and Lovers* that were drawn from his own family life in a Nottinghamshire mining town. It also is a Bildungsroman in the way that Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a Bildungsroman; like Stephen Dedalus, Paul Morel, Lawrence's fictional counterpart, moves through his innocent childhood and young adulthood toward a defining of his artistic commitment to life. But the novel surely encourages a philosophical interest as well, and critics have been equally intrigued by the Freudian interpretation, which can be supported by both the title and some of Lawrence's own comments, notably his remark that "one sheds one's sickness in books."[2] However, to see *Sons and Lovers* in only one of these lights is to ignore the novel's largest meanings as well as to miss its richness.

Lawrence obviously selected as this novel's subject the real events of his life, and in conveying their meaning, he chose techniques which would allow him to explore and develop those events and finally to evaluate them.[3] Thus, *Sons and Lovers* is best read as a novel of complexly integrated meanings and levels of interpretation, and the network of images and symbols provides the means by which both the poetic and realistic logic of the novel can be grasped. Although Lawrence's use of images and symbols throughout his work has been widely

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[1]See. for example, Julian Moynahan, *The Deed of Life: The Novels and Tales of D. H. Lawrence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963, pp. 13-31; Daniel A. Weiss, *Oedipus in Nottingham: D. H. Lawrence* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962); and Maurice Beebe, "Lawrence's Sacred Fount: The Artist Theme of *Sons and Lovers*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 4 (1962), 539-552.

[2]Letter to A. W. McLeod, October 26, 1913, in *The Collected Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Harry T. Moore (New York: The Viking Press, 1962), I, 234.

documented, the symbolism of characters' names, either in *Sons and Lovers* or in his other works, has been all but ignored.

Lawrence's use of symbolism changed as his artistic vision changed, and his use of name symbolism for the most part disappeared in later works. The early works, *The White Peacock* (1911), *The Trespasser* (1912), and *Sons and Lovers* (1913), are rich in realistic detail, and the symbolic embellishment lies in the imagery and, in *The Trespasser* and *Sons and Lovers*, in characters' names as well. In *The White Peacock*, all but one of the names are simple, typical, English names; consider Cyril, George, Lettie, Emily, and Meg. In *The Trespasser*, which is more autobiographical than the first novel, the names of the main characters, Siegmund and Helena, are more symbolic. On the other hand, characters in some of the subsequent novels, like *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1920), although paraded against a realistic backdrop in which even details of dress and food are carefully described, are themselves less and less realistic and in fact are more and more symbolic. As Edward Shanks noted in an early review of Lawrence's cumulative work, the later principal characters are "always and consistently abnormal both in their speech and in their actions" and "are not and are not intended to be human beings as we know them. They are in fact the symbols."[4] If we consider the names of Loerke, Gerald Crich, Rupert Birkin, Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen, and others, we can only conclude that when Lawrence's characters were abstract he chose names for them that had no obvious symbolic import but rather suggested by connotation the foreign, the exotic, the eccentric, the transmundane. Of his novels, *Sons and Lovers* is the one in which Lawrence took the most apparent care to provide additional meanings for his main characters by giving them names with strong symbolism. Perhaps because the immediate subject of *Sons and Lovers* was Lawrence's own past, he was able to give the story distance and depth only by giving his characters symbolic names. That the characters' names in *Sons and Lovers* seem also completely real and appropriate probably attests to Lawrence's imaginative skill, which Francis Ferguson describes as so concrete that he seemed not "to distinguish between the reality and the metaphor or symbol which makes it plain to us."[5] A careful analysis of the names in *Sons and*

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[3]See Mark Schorer's classic argument on this point in "Technique as Discovery," *The Hudson Review*, 1 (Spring, 1948), 67-78.

[4]"Mr. D. H. Lawrence: Some Characteristics," *London Mercury*, 8 (May, 1923), 64-75.

[5]"D. H. Lawrence's Sensibility," *Critiques and Essays in Modern Fiction*, ed. John W. Aldridge (New York: The Ronald Press, 1952, p. 335).

Lovers, however, not only reveals Lawrence's imaginative skill but also delineates the novel's crucial themes.

The name in *Sons and Lovers* that often has been interpreted is that of Paul's mother, Gertrude Morel. Mrs. Morel's given name is shared with Hamlet's mother and thus underscores the psychological bond between Paul Morel and his mother. After Lawrence had written part of the first draft of the novel he would call finally *Sons and Lovers*, he wrote to Rachel Annand Taylor (December 3, 1910) about the imminent death of his own mother, who assuredly was the model for Gertrude Morel. He says, "We have loved each other, almost with a husband and wife love, as well as filial and maternal."[6] Such a statement conjoined with the name *Gertrude* places the relationship between Paul and his mother on a plane with that relationship between Hamlet and his mother and emphasizes the Oedipal theme that contributes to the psychological meaning of Lawrence's novel.

But to see Paul as Hamlet or Oedipus is to forget that his subjugation to his mother was neither coeval with birth nor fated, and certainly not the simple instinct that Freud defined. Lawrence himself deplored the limiting Freudian interpretation of *Sons and Lovers.* He wrote to Barbara Low in 1916, "I hated the *Psychoanalysis Review of Sons and Lovers.* You know I think 'complexes' are vicious half-statements of the Freudians: sort of can't see wood for trees. When you've said *Mutter*-complex, you've said nothing—no more than if you called hysteria a nervous disease. Hysteria isn't nerves, a complex is not simply a sex relation: far from it.—My poor book: it was, as art, a fairly complete truth: so they carve a half lie out of it, and say, 'Voila.' Swine!"[7]

Rather than to instinct Lawrence attributed Paul's love for his mother to her possessive love for him that in turn was born out of her contrariety with her husband. But Lawrence presses still further and traces the discord between Gertrude and Walter Morel to their different class backgrounds. Born from the unhappy conjunction of those backgrounds, Paul was divided between them.[8]

While Gertrude Morel's name lends itself to the most obviously psychological interpretation, her name also conveys other meanings. Lawrence, who had absorbed the orthodox Christianity of the Midland

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[6]*Letters,* I, 69.

[7]*Letters,* I, 475.

[8]This observation was made by Mary Freeman in *D. H. Lawrence: A Basic Study of His Ideas* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1955), p. 10.

region, would have been aware of the immense popularity of Saint Gertrude , a noblewoman and an abbess of Helfta in Saxony. She had an exceedingly high reputation for sanctity, to which Gertrude Morel would have aspired.[9] Lawrence emphasizes both Mrs. Morel's conventionalism and her piety when he tells us that she "came of a good old burgher family, famous independents who had fought with Colonel Hutchinson, and who remained stout congregationalists." Moreover, she, who shrinks from "the first contact with the Bottoms women," is said to be "puritan," "high-minded," and "stern"; she loves "ideas" and is considered "intellectual." As such, she is opposite to her husband, Walter Morel, whose fund of humor is described as "soft, non-intellectual, warm, a kind of gambolling" (Chapter I).[10]

The very difference in their beings has been created in their respective classes, and it is this opposition which pulls the children. One would suppose that Mrs. Morel chose the names of all the children, although Lawrence describes only her naming of Paul. The names of William, Arthur, and Anne, names of four English kings and an English queen, are names rich in their suggestions of English ideals and traditions and hint at Mrs. Morel's attempts to establish from the outset her children's alliances in the battle between respectability and its opposite. For indeed, soon after William's birth, a battle begins between husband and wife that doesn't end, Lawrence tells us, until "the death of one." She strives "to make him undertake his own responsibilities" and "to fulfill his obligations." But his nature is "purely sensuous," and he cannot endure her rectitude and her ideas. Lawrence explains that "she could not be content with the little he

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[9]See Donald Attwater, comp., *Names and Name-Days* (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1939), p. 47; and E. G. Withycombe, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names,* 2nd. ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1950), p. 126.

In spite of his quarrel with orthodox Christianity, Lawrence used Biblical symbols in much of his fiction, although only rarely in late years as names. In *Apocalypse* he said that the profound truths embedded in the symbolism of old religions carry the "initiate" back through swooping eras of time (1931; rpt. New York: The Viking Press, 1966; see pp. 10, 183-184). In the foreward to *Fantasia of the Unconscious* he wrote, "And so the intense potency of symbols is part at least memory. And so it is that all the great symbols and myths which dominate the world when our history first begins are very much the same in every country and every people, the great myths all relate to one another" (1921, 22; rpt. New York: The Viking Press, 1960 [combined with *Psychoanalysis and the Unconsciousness* in one volume], p. 55). He had not yet developed his interest in the anthropological symbolism of Indian, Egyptian, and Hindu cultures, and in his early work the Bible served him efficiently as a well-spring for symbols.

[10]These quotations and all subsequent quotations from *Sons and Lovers* are taken from the 1922 edition by Boni and Liveright (London), reprinted, with an introduction by Mark Schorer, by Harper & Brothers (New York, 1951).

might be, she would have him the much that he ought to be. So in seeking to make him nobler than he could be, she destroyed him" and "injured and hurt and scarred herself."

Thus they struggle to possess the children, who are drawn strangely to each of them. But the struggle kills William. Before his premature death, William seems to have chosen his mother's side in the war. Conventionally middle class, he has a good job with a London firm, and he is a gentleman. But he becomes engaged to Lily, whose name in Lawrence's psychology symbolizes sensuality; she has the appearance of a lady, however, until Mrs. Morel extracts from William the fact that Lily has "never read a book in her life." Mr. Morel is exultant. "'Er's like me," he exclaims as he perceives that William has chosen sensuality over intellectuality. But William is torn between his mother's contempt for Lily and his father's appreciation of her. William cannot resolve the conflict, and the stress destroys him.[11]

Paul later has his version of Lily in Clara Dawes, a married woman who lives on Bluebell Hill and also is associated with flowers. She kneels and breathes "scent from the cowslips," and when she and Paul make love, her red carnations splatter their petals over her clothes and over the ground. Clara's given name, by its derivation from the Latin *clāra*, suggests vivid or intense light, generally of the sun or the moon.[12] For Paul, Clara's "light" must be the light of the moon rather than the light of the sun. The moon first becomes an important symbol in the novel when Mrs. Morel, after being forced out of the house by her drunken husband, is forced into the "streaming" and "magnificent" moonlight, the equivalent in Lawrence's fiction, as Dorothy Van Ghent accurately has said, of a "vast torrential force" and "phallic power" as well as "the greater and universal demiurge that was anciently called Eros."[13] Indeed, one of the most memorable pictures of Clara is presented when she stands naked outlined against the sea and against the disappearing moon. As she is "dazzled out of sight by the sunshine," she becomes "just a concentrated speck blown along, a

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[11]Cf. Lawrence's poem "Lilies in the Fire," in which the poet sees the woman as a "stack of lilies, all white and gold," and himself as a sunbeam (moonbeam in the later version in *The Collected Poems* [London: Martin Secker, 1928]) that will warm their "pallor into radiance" and "light up their cold white beauty."

[12]See Dorothy Van Ghent, "On Sons and Lovers," in *The English Novel: Form and Function* (1953; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 249.

[13]According to the *OED, Clear,* as derived from *clārus* and meaning luminosity, often has been used to describe daylight; however, as early as 1300 it is recorded as being used to describe vivid moonlight.

tiny white foam-bubble, almost nothing among the morning." Clara bathed in sunlight rather than moonlight is a Clara stripped of sensuality and one whom Paul suddenly realizes he no longer needs.

It is the naming of Paul, however, that early in the novel establishes the significance of names in *Sons and Lovers.* When her third child is born, Mrs. Morel says suddenly, "I will call him Paul." With Lawrence's subsequent declaration that "she knew not why," we are given to understand that the choice was compelled by subconscious motives. The name *Paul* clearly was pulled out of her memory because of its associations with her "haughty" and "proud" father, who, we already have been told, had been sympathetic to only one man, the Apostle Paul, and had "ignored all sensuous pleasure." In naming her son *Paul,* Mrs. Morel is confirming her predilection for the spirit over the body and expressing a wish for her son to align himself with her rather than with her sensuous husband. The name of the Apostle Paul, who said, "Walk in the spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16), has been synonymous with celibacy and austerity and often has been invoked in arguments for virginity and against worldly and physical pleasures.[14]

Another Biblical name in *Sons and Lovers* is that of Miriam Leivers. In Hebrew *Miriam* means "bitter," and Miriam Leivers' Biblical counterpart provides a surprisingly clear understanding of Lawrence's Miriam. The Biblical Miriam was the sister of Moses and perhaps is best remembered for speaking against Moses' having married an Ethiopian woman and for asserting that she and her brother Aaron also had been chosen as prophets of God. Miriam's power-play did not work, of course, because the Lord called the three of them into the tabernacle and sternly told them that He would speak only to His servant Moses, who was humble "above all men who were upon the face of the earth." For her presumption of power, Miriam was struck with leprosy, which was alleviated after seven days only because of the prayers of Aaron and Moses (Numbers 12).

Like her Biblical namesake, Miriam Leivers (whose surname suggests *lever* and by extension *manipulation*) presumes too much power, and Paul perceives, through contemplating the "dark, grasping hands"

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[14]In Galatians 5:16 Paul continues to explain that the spirit and the body are not harmonious. He says, "For the flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other; so that ye cannot do the things that ye would." Throughout the Epistles attributed to Paul, he is revealed as a skillful debater who offered, among outbursts of religious ecstasy, rigid injunctions against sex. See also Galatians 5:22; I Thessalonians, 4; I Corinthians 6:15-7:40; and Romans 1:26-27..

of the purple iris, that Miriam would possess his very soul. Just as the ancient Miriam had publicly chastised her brother for marrying a woman of whom she did not approve, Miriam Leivers disparages Paul's affair with Clara, which she regards as "his littleness, his meanness, and his folly." The earlier Miriam's righteous indignation and her attempt to acquire power are repeated in the character of Miriam Leivers and are revealed simultaneously in a single passage in *Sons and Lovers* when Miriam acknowledges her resentment of Clara but decides upon a course of action that she believes will bring ultimate power to herself. Miriam is bitter that Paul must go, "but she could let him go into an inn for a glass of whiskey, so she could let him go to Clara, so long as it was something that would satisfy a need in him, and leave him free for herself to possess." As the Miriam of old was reduced to penitence, so also Miriam Leivers, her sacrifice rejected, is forced to withdraw, resentful and "feeling dead."

The most profoundly significant name in *Sons and Lovers*, however, is the name *Morel*. Although Walter Morel's given name means "powerful warrior" and defines his rôle as the archetypal male, he usually is called by his surname only, and he becomes inextricably identified with his label.[15] Although other members of the family claim it or use it, it is foremost his name. When we consider the essential meanings of the name, they further enhance the very character of the man. The word *morel* refers first to a genus of edible mushrooms characterized by fleshy, strong stalks. *Webster's New World Dictionary* (2nd. edition) describes the morel more specifically as resembling "a sponge on a stalk." The *OED* quotes the 1884 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which notes that the morel is a "delicious edible fungus" and that it is "more common in Britain than is generally supposed" (*Britannica*, XVII, 76). Two details derived from these definitions are particularly important here: the edibility of the plant and the phallic symbolism. Because Walter Morel is identified with the physical and the sensuous, he most often is depicted in the kitchen in the midst of eating and drinking. Indeed, when Morel sits in a room, it is full of "the smell of meat and vegetables." The obvious phallic symbolism of the morel fungus adds to that already accrued to the image of the man who often is seen "with a stalk from the hedge between his teeth" and whose sensuous "flame of life" is compared to the "flame from a candle." One of the memorable pictures of Morel and his children is provided by the scene in which he makes fuses, or,

[15]See Attwater, p. 96.

symbolically, nurtures the phallic urge. "Morel fetched a sheaf of long sound wheat-straws from the attic. These he cleaned with his hand, till each one gleamed like a stalk of gold, after which he cut the straws into lengths of about six inches, leaving, if he could, a notch at the bottom of each piece. He always had a beautifully sharp knife that could cut a straw clean without hurting it. Then he set in the middle of the table a heap of gun-powder, a little pile of black grains upon the white-scrubbed board." He truly represents the phallic consciousness, the acceptance of which, Lawrence tells us, is crucial to personal fulfillment.

Two other meanings of the word *morel* add dimension to the concepts already established. The word is sometimes used to refer to the plant otherwise known as "night shade," and it is the name for a dark-colored horse (see the *OED*). Again, two details are important here: the idea of horse and the image of darkness. Throughout Lawrence's fiction animals play a significant rôle in allowing characters to reveal the level of their psychic development, but horses are further symbols of physical power and sensuality. In *Apocalypse* Lawrence explains his understanding of the horse symbol:

> Horses, always horses! How the horse dominated the mind of the early races, especially of the Mediterranean! You were a lord if you had a horse. Far back, far back in our dark soul the horse prances. He is a dominant symbol: he gives us lordship: he links us, the first palpable and throbbing link with the ruddy-glowing Almighty of potency: he is the beginning even of our god-head in the flesh. And as a symbol he roams the dark underworld meadows of the soul. He stamps and threshes in the dark fields of your soul and mine. The sons of God who came down and knew the daughters of men and begot the great Titans, they had "the members of horses," says Enoch.
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> Within the last fifty years man has lost the horse. Now man is lost. Man is lost to life and power—an underling and a wastrel. While horses thrashed the streets of London, London lived.
>
> The horse, the horse! the symbol of surging potency and power of movement, of action, in man.[16]

A dark horse is even more meaningful in Lawrence's fiction, however, because darkness is the image he most often associates with the phallic consciousness, the great procreative force of life. *A Dictionary of British Surnames* lists *Morel* (also variations *Morell, Morill, Morrell, Morrill*) and includes the note that it is possibly a

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[16] *Apocalypse,* pp. 97-98.

diminutive of Old French *more,* which means "swarthy as a Moor."[17] It is significant that Morel prefers darkness; he is exhilarated within the darkness of the mines, and when he is at home, he prefers "to keep the blinds down and the candles lit even when it was daylight." The darkness of the descent into the pit, the darkness of night, the darkness of death—all must be acknowledged and acclaimed in order for one to find impetus for an ascension from the pits, to appreciate the light of day, and to know the meaning of life. Walter Morel represents that facet of life which can be symbolized naturally and universally in the context of Lawrence's fiction by an edible, stalky mushroom and a dark-colored horse.

After the introductory pages when Gertrude Morel's girlhood and courtship are recounted, she is referred to consistently as Mrs. Morel. The title serves as an ironic reminder of her marriage to Walter Morel, her only contact with sensuality. Ostensibly she functions both biologically and legally as Mrs. Morel, but to herself she acknowledges that her life is "baffled and gripped into incandescence by thought and spirit."

The name *Morel* is applied in the most important way when it is linked to the name of Paul. Keeping in mind that the first title Lawrence planned for the novel was *Paul Morel*, we can see that the character Paul Morel symbolizes a fusing of the spiritual and the sensual.[18] Like his mother, his maternal grandfather, and the Apostle Paul, Paul Morel values the things of the spirit. But he accepts also the other half of the great rhythm of life, represented so well by his father and implied by the surname itself. An early scene with Paul and his mother defines the attraction Paul feels to both of them. "The world is a wonderful place," his mother says, but Paul rejoins with "And so is the pit." It is as if Lawrence, through the symbolic naming of his central characters, has wished to show that of all the characters in this novel, he holds out for Paul Morel the only possible hope for finding the cosmic balance of life. According to Lawrence's doctrine, finding that balance is the equivalent of finding salvation. With the symbolic names, he has raised his novel from the level of mere autobiography. Because he uses names rich in psychological and Biblical allusion, as

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[17]P. H. Reaney and R. M. Wilson, *A Dictionary of British Surnames,* 2nd. ed. (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 243.

[18]We may also say that the final title, *Sons and Lovers* (with all the suggestion of filial, parental, and even divine love that *Sons* provides) retains the same symbolic fusion of the spiritual and the sensual.

well as historical association, he gives the novel strata of meanings that not only ensure richness but point out to us that despite the particularity of our lives we cannot separate ourselves from our mythological pasts or from the common humanity that encompasses us all.

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