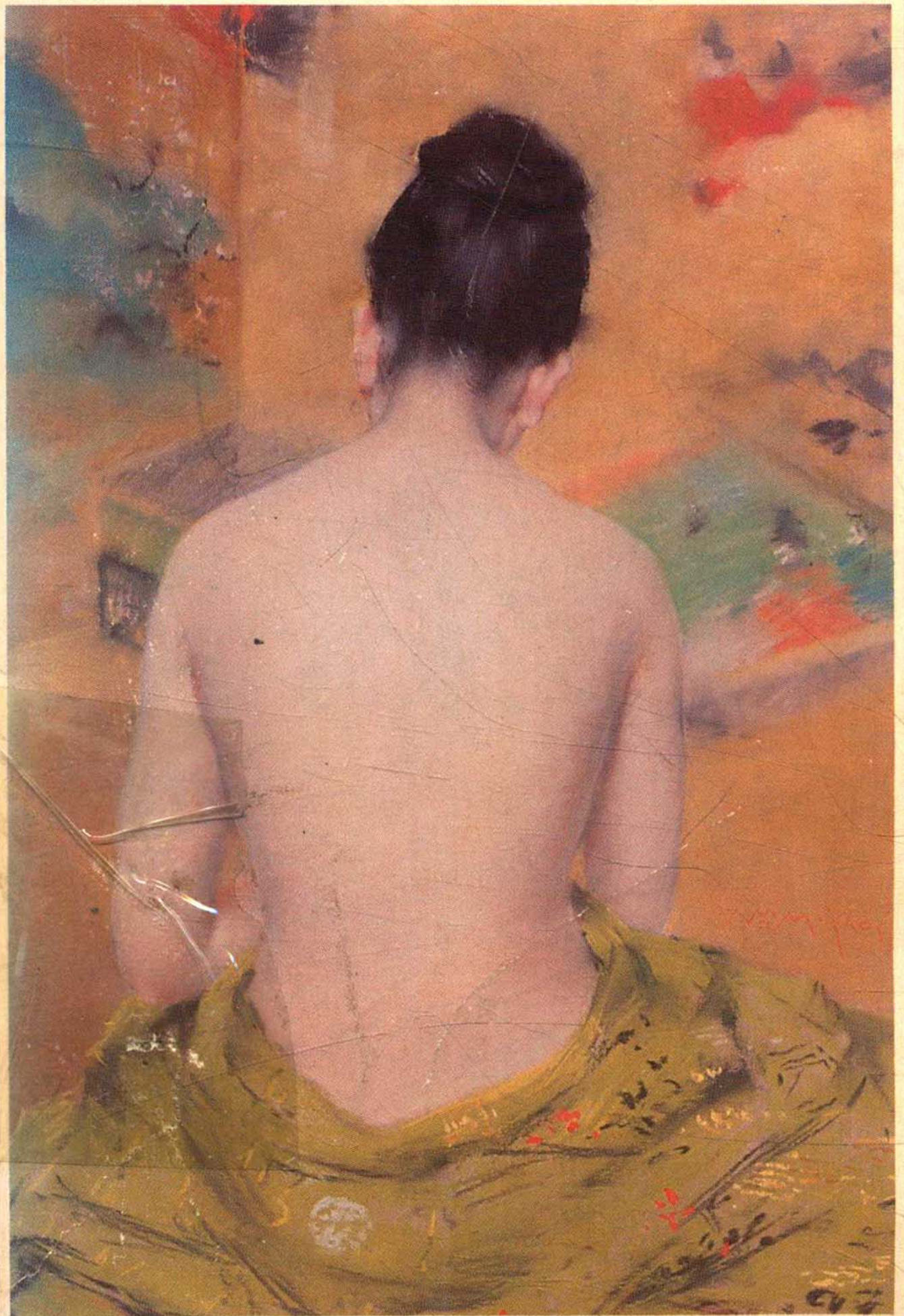


*Signet Classic*

# SONS • AND • LOVERS

D. H. LAWRENCE





SONS • AND • LOVERS

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D. H. LAWRENCE

*With an Introduction by  
Benjamin DeMott*



A SIGNET CLASSIC

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the years *Sons and Lovers*, D. H. Lawrence's most popular book, has been paid some gorgeous critical tributes. "Absolutely . . . the greatest thing in English fiction," said the Irish short story writer Frank O'Connor, speaking about the first half of the work. "Supreme proof of [Lawrence's] gifts as a novelist," says the editor of the standard contemporary volume of academic interpretations, speaking of the work as a whole.

There are dissenters, though. Some readers find the book too autobiographical—too close to flat life-history. Others profess to catch a whiff of Freudian case study (subject: abnormal maternal fixation) rising from the central narrative—Paul Morel's tortured effort to advance from engulfing emotional involvement with his mother to mature linkage with a woman outside his family circle. And, particularly in the last quarter-century, critics have taken to complaining that the passionate critique of modern industrial civilization—the grand historical, utopian and cosmological themes elsewhere dominant in Lawrence—never sound in *Sons and Lovers*.

There's no denying the closeness of the resemblance between Paul Morel's life and that of his creator. (David Herbert Lawrence grew up in a mining village in England's industrial midlands; his father was a coal miner and his mother "married down" and his promising older brother died young; the fabric of his parents' marriage was ripped by bitterness, violence and hate; his mother, to whom his bond was unusually strong, fought off the first young woman Lawrence loved; he went to work at sixteen, like Paul Morel, in a truss factory—and so on and on.) Neither can it be said that the author of *Sons and Lovers* is alert enough to the occasionally embarrassing sexual undertone of encounters in his book between mother and son: "Suddenly their eyes met, and she smiled to him—a rare intimate smile, beautiful with brightness and love . . ."

But objections of this sort can easily be overstated. Read any of the informal bits of writing about the Lawrence family set down by their contemporaries—including Jessie Chambers ("Miriam") and her younger sister May—and you find no hint of the intensity or elevation of *Sons and Lovers* at its best; the book is miles removed from "actual happenings" as others saw them. And there's much in the complex relationship between Gertrude and Paul Morel that resists definition

by psychobabble. Lawrence's own reaction to psychoanalytical commentators on his book was hostile; he said that they "carve a half lie" out of a work that is, "as art, a fairly complete truth . . ." A predictable, but justifiably dismissive reaction, in my opinion.

It's the point about Lawrence's major themes and doctrines—their absence from or unclarity in *Sons and Lovers*—that demands attention. Today's received wisdom holds that this writer's high place among English novelists derives in no small measure from the range of intellectual and aesthetic resources—powers of analysis, historical recreation, prophecy—that he brought to bear in support of the proposition that the West is on a disaster course and that all of us must change our lives. Can a book silent about change rank as the peer of those works—*The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1920)—in which Lawrence fully articulated his case against modern society and for the transformation of the modern mind?

Best to be direct: *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* are superb achievements, and essential reading for anyone wishing to approach the core of D. H. Lawrence. Both are brilliant in their address to the human costs of an industrialism that lusts for "a new and terrible purity." And *The Rainbow*—in such chapters as the remarkably moving (and hilarious) "Wedding at the Marsh"—splendidly evokes the substance of the organic and communal life of traditional societies. The writer owes some debts—to the Romantic poets, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, others—but the fundamental originality of his vision stands beyond question. In coming to terms with it we not only learn of our need for a nobler vision of the interdependency of humanity and nature, but why history as contrived by promoters of the idea of progress is shallow, and why self-willed, ego-ridden individualists are blind to the anti-life dimensions of their own manipulative genius. The great English critic F. R. Leavis had these books primarily in mind when he asserted that "the insight, the wisdom, the revived and re-educated feeling for health that Lawrence brings are what, as our civilization goes, we desperately need." *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* rank, without doubt, as indispensable twentieth-century masterpieces.

Both books are, however, humanly less rich—less in touch with the variousness of experience—than the story of Paul Morel. The in-touchness I speak of brings problems with it, to be sure; it weakens the author's hold on his own prejudices, prevents him from cutting his sympathies to fit his purpose



and desire. Consider the treatment accorded Paul's father, Walter Morel. If Lawrence had been obedient solely to the interests of coherence, he'd have represented Walter Morel consistently as a brute. How else account for the strong attachment of mother and son, as well as for all the children's hostility to the man? We do indeed see Morel drunk, violent and spiteful, and hear him explicitly denounced (on a single page Morel is described as "small, mean . . . dirty . . . paltry . . . nasty"). And we're not offered a single, off-the-rack, liberal-minded extenuation. No suggestion that the Walter Morels of the world aren't wholly to blame for their defects, or that the responsibility of financiers and magnates must be examined in any probe of the brutalization of a coal miner, or that Walter Morel's children are themselves diminished when they deny him their love.

And yet it's always somehow apparent that Lawrence's pure energy of responsiveness—his in-touchness, his instinct for whole truths—can't tolerate the oversimplification and falsehood in the version of Walter Morel that would best suit his novelistic design and desire. He draws us close, time and again, to inconveniently complicating evidence. We see Morel gentle at his wife's bedside after the birth of Paul. When the buttoymates gather to share out their earnings, we glimpse solidarities indicating that Morel, among his own kind, is a decent sort. Instead of merely noting that Morel at home has good or peaceful intervals, Lawrence bends to the task of dramatizing the pleasures Morel bestows upon others during those intervals. We take in that the small, paltry, nasty man is also an unpretentious, self-respecting, amusedly self-dramatizing parent at one with his skills as smith or cobbler or fusemaker, keen on entertaining his children with stories, inclined to sing as Wordsworth's solitary reaper sang:

. . . when he worked [he] was happy at work. Sometimes, in the evening, he cobbled the boots or mended the kettle or his pit-bottle. Then he always wanted several attendants, and the children enjoyed it. They united with him in the work, in the actual doing of something . . . He was a good workman, dexterous, and one who, when he was in a good humour, always sang . . . It was nice to see him run with a piece of red-hot iron into the scullery crying:

"Out of my road—out of my road!"

Then he hammered the soft, red-glowing stuff on his iron goose, and made the shape he wanted. Or he sat absorbed for a moment, soldering. Then the children watched with joy as the metal sank suddenly molten, and was shoved about against

the nose of the soldering-iron, while the room was full of scent of burnt resin and hot tin, and Morel was silent and intent for a minute. He always sang when he mended boots because of the jolly sound of hammering. And he was rather happy when he sat putting great patches on his moleskin trousers, which he would often do, considering them too dirty and the stuff too hard, for his wife to mend.

So impressed have some readers been with Walter Morel—so admiring of his unselfconscious manliness and his natural readiness to set his own will aside rather than force it upon others—that they forget the drinking and the nastiness and undertake to transform him into a Symbol, a “creative life force,” a positive value to be contrasted with his wife’s negative possessiveness and individualistic wilfulness. Late Lawrentian doctrine makes much of such contrasts, and it’s not surprising that critics seek to smuggle one into *Sons and Lovers*, in order to sharpen the book’s focus. But to do so means exchanging a human presence for an abstraction. Experience teaches that mean and paltry spirits can be, by turns, marvelously lively and lovable, and that the behavior of persons properly reviled at one moment may at the next banish revulsion. The characterization of Walter Morel reflects the strength of a great writer’s instinct for the variousness and contradictoriness of life.

Another sign of the vitality of that instinct is Lawrence’s feeling for the moral complexity of the given social world—the world of commonplace ambitions, hopes and anxieties, the world of towns, cramped houses and shops, “nuclear families.” Everybody who’s lived in it knows this world as a place wherein, once again, positives confusingly intermingle with negatives. Where do I draw the line between my prideful acquisitiveness and my selfless longing to protect and lift up my young? My cultural aspirations: how is it that they seem to testify both to my deep need, resulting from the collapse both of faith and of community, for some means of attaining personal consequence, *and* to my shabby snobbishness? In *Sons and Lovers* the muddles of lower and middle life are shown forth as wholes, mirrors of things as they puzzlingly intractably are. The author is quite uninterested in defending the consciousness of the upwardly mobile (as a subsequent generation was to say)—people driving themselves to “make it” in a money culture. Yet from start to finish his book is alive to truths about that consciousness wrongheadedly left



out of the diatribes of many a provocative damnation-dealer in the later Lawrence.

Which truths, exactly? One that's deserving of notice is this: human creatures stirred not by a sense of community but by a self-involved act of private purchase may nevertheless earn profound respect—in fact, may awaken and nourish, as “consumers,” a hitherto undiscovered potency for fellow feeling within themselves. When Gertrude Morel covets, at market, a “little dish” adorned with cornflowers for which the crockery man asks sevenpence, she's enclosed in a fantasy of personal grace. The object whispers to her, tells her who she is, names her sense of self. Insinuating, self-endorsing, unrelenting, the voice confirms her conviction of her difference, her longing for self-expression and for means of publishing her unique nature. —*You care for that which is modest, beautiful, practical. You are a person of good sense and good taste. Poor though you are, your inner nature is distinguished.* Mrs. Morel struggles against the tempter. Remembering the precariousness of her economics, masking the turbulence of desire, “coldly polite,” she asks the price, realizes it's impossible—moves on.

But the voice won't be quieted. *Poor though you are . . .* The potman feels the pressure of his customer's unspoken yearning. “. . . She could not leave the marketplace without it.” Mrs. Morel feels the potman as her “enemy.” Resentment floods over:

Suddenly he shouted:

“Do you want it for fivpence?”

She started. Her heart hardened; but then she stooped and took up the dish.

“I'll have it,” she said.

“Yer'll do me the favour, like?” he said. “Yer'd better spit in it, like yer do when y've something give yer.”

Mrs. Morel paid him the fivpence in a cold manner.

“I don't see you give it me,” she said. “You wouldn't let me have it for fivpence if you didn't want to.”

“In this flamin', scrattlin' place you may count yerself lucky if you can give your things away,” he growled.

Bad feeling, clearly. There's covetousness on one side and, on the other, bitter impatience at the universal inequity—the unending dog-eat-dog cheapness of it all. What a world! we say—closed-in, defensive, pennypinching, wary, huddled, jealous of “rights,” self-absorbed. “There *must* be more money,” the voices scream in Lawrence's famous story “The



Rocking Horse Winner." "There must be more money—more than ever! More than ever!" *I want I want I want—*

But in *Sons and Lovers*, as often in life, the tight "scratlin'" world eases unexpectedly. While still at the stall Mrs. Morel edges forward from anger at the man's insulting tone to acknowledgment of his frustration ("Yes; there are bad times, and good"), and a minute later, in Paul's company her sympathy begins to breathe:

"You know what a wretch I've said [the potman] was? Well I don't think he's quite so bad . . . I think he can't make any money—well, it's everybody's cry alike nowadays—and it makes him disagreeable."

Shedding the price-and-bargain mentality takes a while naturally. Mother and son play out a line of suspense to each other, posing but not pressing a question about how much the dish cost. Luxuriatingly, teasingly, they let the price question hang fire, Paul descanting on the decor of the object ("I love cornflowers"), his mother prolonging the moment by remembering an earlier gift ("I thought of the teapot you bought"). When at length, prodded obliquely by her son, Mrs. Morel brings forth the price, there's triumph in her voice. When Paul speaks chidingly ("It's not enough"), we recognize that he's complimenting a hard bargainer, not uttering moral outrage. When the two discuss the possibility that unfair advantage has been taken, it's the conspiratorial intimacy of lucky thieves that's felt, not nascent guilt. (How delicately, here and throughout the scene, the details of feeling are registered!) And when Mrs. Morel chides herself ("a wicked, extravagant woman"), we know that this is an act not of recrimination but of superstition (if I acknowledge the likelihood that, up the road, I'll be punished for having indulged myself, perhaps that acknowledgment—proof that I'm at least afraid and remorseful—will convince the gods to let me off just this once). Only slowly and erratically, only after a succession of feints and ploys, games and winks, can either party break free of the money issue, the money entanglement.

But freedom *is* the destination. One final extravagance is produced—and now, at last, comes the generous glory of shared possession, mother and son giving away equally to pure, selfless joy:

She unfolded another lump of newspaper and disclosed some roots of pansies and of crimson daisies.

"Four penn'orth!" she moaned.



"How *cheap!*" he cried.

"Yes, but I couldn't afford it *this week* of all weeks."

"But lovely!" he cried.

"Aren't they!" she exclaimed, giving way to pure joy. "Paul, look at this yellow one, isn't it—and a face just like an old man!"

Is the face in the flower the potman's face? Who knows? What counts is the intricate interweaving of *I give* and *I want*. In this plain room we breathe the familiar sweetsour air of dailiness, touch the mixed grain of how-it-is; cant about materialism and egotism has no sovereignty over our mind. For the length of the scene we know all that's important about the culture of buy-cheap-and-sell-dear. We know that this culture dehumanizes—and that it's an instrument for the release of kindness, considerateness, love. We know that the hunger for self-realization—individual style, "a new cotton blouse"—can shut the door on others at a quarter to four in the afternoon and, a half hour later, open it, welcoming warmth and connection.

And the price (going all the way with the money metaphor is no mistake) of the knowledge isn't outrageous. We haven't traded a momentous this for a trivial that, haven't accepted a reductive version of Idea *x* in order to hype one or another neglected Idea *y*. Fair market value is assigned to the experience of tough struggle to sustain individuality and self-respect in the fact of fearful adversity. (We participate in this experience, discover its claim to dignity, by inhabiting the consciousness of willful, dogged, courageous Gertrude Morel.) But our sympathetic investment in the struggle isn't so heavy that it requires us to deny that individuality has limits as a value. The novelist is moved by the pride of Gertrude Morel, but moved also by the experience of loss of self, initiation into "one's own nothingness"—witness the magnificent passages after Paul and Clara's lovemaking in a field:

. . . after such an evening they both were very still, having known the immensity of passion. They felt small, half afraid, childish, and wondering, like Adam and Eve when they lost their innocence and realized the magnificence of the power which drove them out of Paradise and across the great night and the great day of humanity. It was for each of them an initiation and a satisfaction. 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 tre-



mendous heave that lifted every grassblade its little height, and every tree, and living thing, then why fret about themselves? They could let themselves be carried by life . . .

One can't ignore, of course, the bleakness at the end; *Sons and Lovers* is a tragedy. But that circumstance only qualifies, doesn't cancel the larger implicit argument of the whole: the argument for the variousness of things. It's difficult to speak carefully enough here—hard to avoid blurring the distinction between the fullness of Lawrentian art and mechanically budgeted work that dutifully balances sunshine with darkness, good news with bad, sentimental love with sentimental squalor. The emotional rhythms of *Sons and Lovers* need to be lived into; terror, defeat, depression, suffering, continuously jostle enthusiasm and delight. There is no balance, only a constant quickness to the truth that, within vital human creatures, trillings of the celebratory nerve rarely seen mindless or tasteless or wrong. "Paul was hugely delighted" . . . "Home was love, and they loved it with a passion of love, whatever the suffering had been" . . . "The world was a wonderful place . . . and wonderfully beautiful" . . . "Everybody was tip-top full of happiness" . . . The relishing and praising in the book seem almost ceaseless—ecstasy in the look of a train ticket, in "a positive miracle of delicate sunshine," in the downhill motion of a bike, in the sound of the sea "clanging at the land." The secret of the book's variousness, surely, lies in the irrepressibility of the author's impulse to appreciate.

That impulse is present in the later Lawrence—in the works in which the novelist is in total possession of his vision, entirely clear about the standards by which each kind of experience, human, natural, religious, economic, is to be valued. We're as conscious of the celebratory urge at Tom Brangwen's table in *The Rainbow* as we are at the impromptu dance, at a German hostel, in *Women in Love*. But part of the very authority—the intellectual persuasiveness—of those works stems from the proof offered earlier in the career that the author's knowledge of the grainy familiar world was broad and acute, and that his access to people close to ourselves was easy and unforced. The imperishable Lawrence, in my reckoning, includes a half-dozen poems, a dozen tales, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, and two travel books, as well as *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. But the sea upon which everything truly weighty in this author floats is, I believe, the work in your hand.

—Benjamin DeMott



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## CONTENTS

---

*Introduction by Benjamin DeMott*

*Part One*

- 1 THE EARLY MARRIED LIFE OF THE MORELS 7
- 2 THE BIRTH OF PAUL, AND ANOTHER BATTLE 31
- 3 THE CASTING OFF OF MOREL—THE  
TAKING ON OF WILLIAM 49
- 4 THE YOUNG LIFE OF PAUL 61
- 5 PAUL LAUNCHES INTO LIFE 86
- 6 DEATH IN THE FAMILY 115

*Part Two*

- 7 LAD-AND-GIRL LOVE 142
- 8 STRIFE IN LOVE 178
- 9 DEFEAT OF MIRIAM 212
- 10 CLARA 247
- 11 THE TEST ON MIRIAM 271
- 12 PASSION 293
- 13 BAXTER DAWES 331
- 14 THE RELEASE 367
- 15 DERELICT 396

*Bibliography*



# SONS • AND • LOVERS

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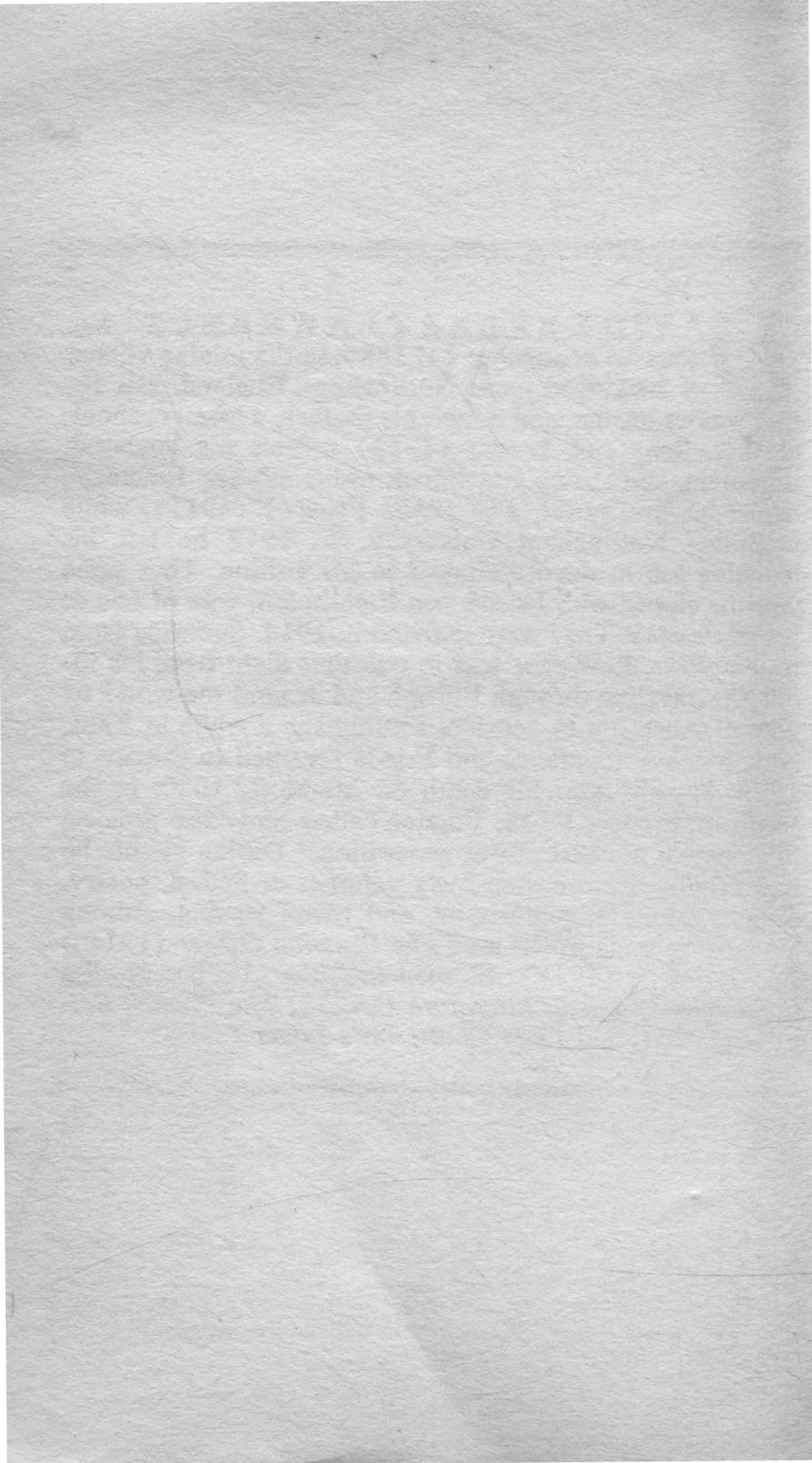
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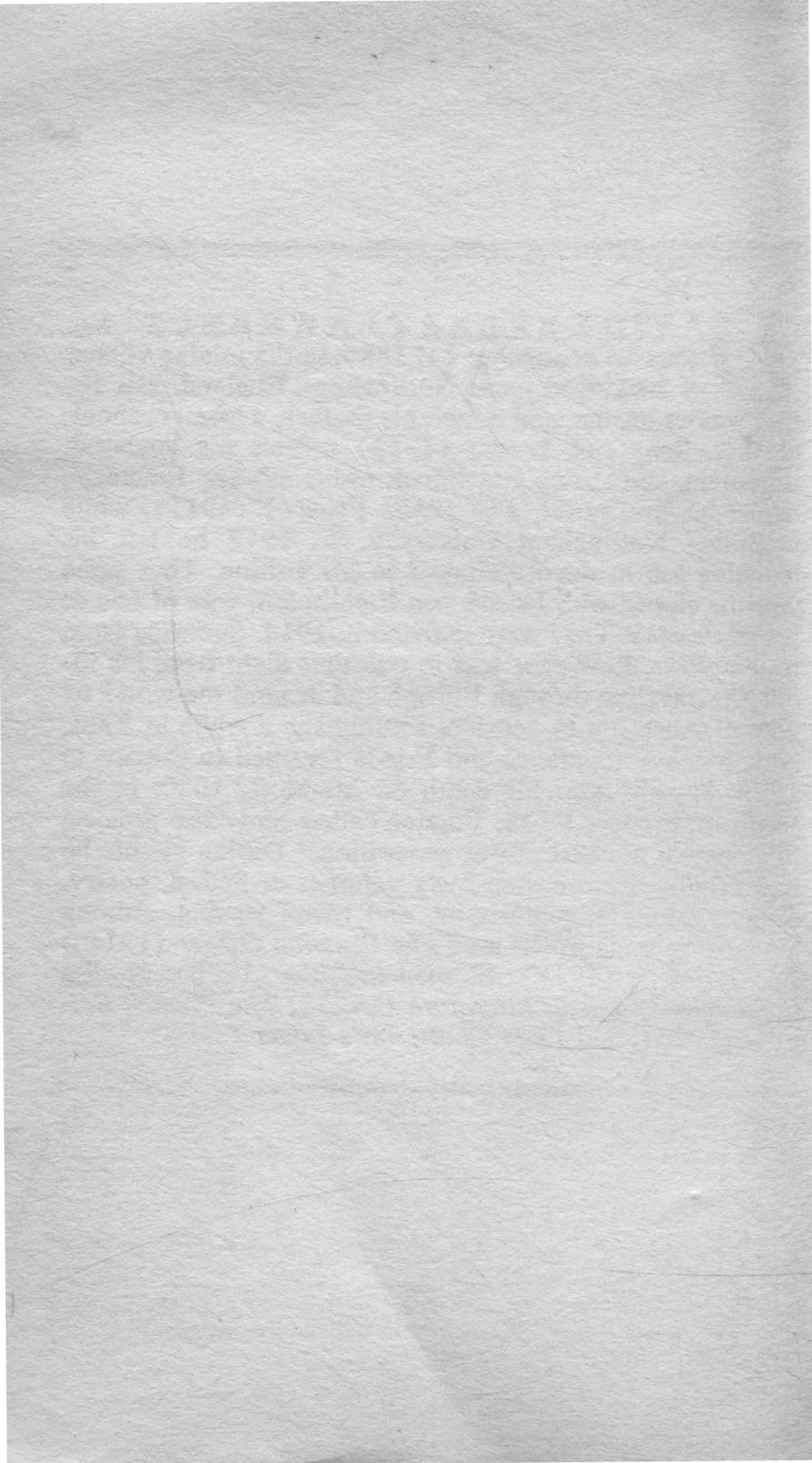
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**D**AVID HERBERT LAWRENCE was born on September 11, 1885, in the mining village of Eastwood, near Nottingham, England. His father was an uneducated miner; his mother, a former school-teacher. *Sons and Lovers* (1913) reflects his boyhood, schooling, and strong attachment to his mother. Lawrence began his first novel, *The White Peacock* (1911), while attending Nottingham University. In 1912 he left his teaching job to devote himself to his writing. That same year he eloped with Frieda von Richthofen, wife of one of his professors. They were married in 1914. Suffering from tuberculosis, Lawrence was in constant flight from his ill-health, traveling through Europe and around the world by way of Australia to Mexico, settling for a while in Taos, New Mexico. Lawrence and Frieda returned to Europe in 1929. Shortly after his death on March 2, 1930, in the south of France, E. M. Forster called him "the greatest imaginative novelist of our generation." During his life he had produced more than forty volumes of fiction, poetry, drama, criticism, philosophy, and travel writing. Among his most famous works are: *The Prussian Officer* (1914); *The Rainbow* (1915); *Women in Love* (1920); *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923); *The Plumed Serpent* (1926); and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928).

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## CONTENTS

---

*Introduction by Benjamin DeMott*

*Part One*

- 1 THE EARLY MARRIED LIFE OF THE MORELS 7
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- 3 THE CASTING OFF OF MOREL—THE  
TAKING ON OF WILLIAM 49
- 4 THE YOUNG LIFE OF PAUL 61
- 5 PAUL LAUNCHES INTO LIFE 86
- 6 DEATH IN THE FAMILY 115

*Part Two*

- 7 LAD-AND-GIRL LOVE 142
- 8 STRIFE IN LOVE 178
- 9 DEFEAT OF MIRIAM 212
- 10 CLARA 247
- 11 THE TEST ON MIRIAM 271
- 12 PASSION 293
- 13 BAXTER DAWES 331
- 14 THE RELEASE 367
- 15 DERELICT 396

*Bibliography*