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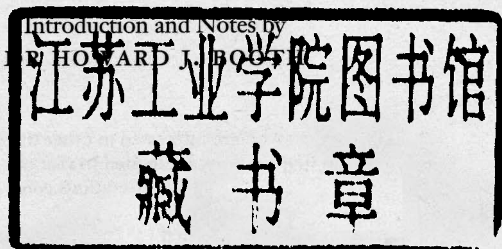
Sons and Lovers

D. H. LAWRENCE

SONS AND LOVERS

D. H. Lawrence

Introduction and Notes by
DR HOWARD J. BOOTH



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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write broad ranging, jargon-free Introductions and to provide Notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

D. H. Lawrence's much-loved third novel, *Sons and Lovers* (1913), is an intense study of family, class and early sexual relationships. It draws heavily on his own experiences, which he was trying hard to understand. The best way to begin, and to get a sense of the issues involved in this process of self-discovery, is by looking at the novel's textual history. Lawrence began working on the first of four drafts of what was to become his third novel, *Sons and Lovers*, in the period of his mother's final illness, before her death in December 1910. He had previously tried to write about his mother's early life but this writing was discarded in favour of work on her mature years. At this stage the spur for the novel was his sense of his mother's wasted life. Lawrence's view at this time of his parents' marriage can be gained from a letter he wrote three days before his mother died. This was also at the point when writing on the first version halted after about a hundred pages:

> My mother was a clever, ironical, delicately moulded woman, of good, old burgher descent. She married below her. My father was dark, ruddy, with a fine laugh. He is a coal miner. He was one of the sanguine temperament, warm and hearty, but unstable: he lacked principle, as my mother would have said. He deceived her and lied to her. She despised him – he drank.
>
> Their marriage life has been one carnal, bloody fight. I was born hating my father: as early as ever I can remember, I shivered with horror when he touched me. He was very bad before I was born.
>
> This has been a kind of bond between me and my mother. We have loved each other, almost with a husband and wife love, as well as filial and maternal. We knew each other by instinct . . . We have been like one, so sensitive to each other that we never needed words. It has been rather terrible, and has made me, in some respects, abnormal.
>
> I think this peculiar fusion of soul (don't think me high-falutin) never comes twice in a life-time – it doesn't seem natural. When it comes it seems to distribute one's consciousness far abroad from oneself, and one 'understands'. I think no one has got 'Understanding' except though love. Now my mother is nearly dead, and I don't know how I am. [*Letters I*, p. 190]

Lawrence here accepts his mother's view that she came down in the world, though, as John Worthen has shown, Lydia Lawrence was not in fact born into the middle class (Worthen, pp. 12–27). After Lawrence describes the positive side of his father's character – he is 'warm and hearty' – the first note of criticism is heard. That he is 'unstable' is given weight and a moral dimension through Mrs Lawrence's opinion of him, which Lawrence simply repeats – 'he lacked principle, as my mother would have said'. The account of the marriage in this letter is of a fight between a wronged woman and an angry, drunken man. Because of the fighting the child has, Lawrence argues, received as part of its very biological make-up a hatred for the father and a close, compensatory, bond with the mother. Lawrence wants to trumpet the closeness of that connection, proud of any distorting effects it may have had, of the way he may have been rendered 'abnormal'. The relationship is uniquely close, like a marriage indeed, and so the possibility of a future wedded life for Lawrence seems foreclosed. The love for the mother at once gives closeness and mutual 'understanding' *and* the understanding produces the love. The account here sees Lawrence's interpretation of his own and his parents' lives locked fast by his relationship with his mother and what is in fact *her* understanding of the events. Without his mother Lawrence feels he has no sense of the past, and no identity.

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This earliest, never completed, draft of the novel is now lost, but a plan exists in one of Lawrence's college notebooks which suggests that he distanced the narrative from what had occurred in life. His feelings for his parents found themselves suggesting invented events in the novel that would give him pleasure. In fantasy, the father-figure dies. Some friends used as the basis for characters are raised in class or in educational achievement. At this stage too he seems to have used minor friends as models for major characters. He did not use close family members, so the story of his dead elder brother Ernest, whose life later provided the material for the story of William, is not included. Neither did he develop characters drawn straight from his main early lovers Jessie Chambers and Louie Burrows (the latter was still his fiancée at this time).

The direct cause of Lawrence breaking off from writing this first version seems to have been grief at his mother's death. He did not return to the novel for three months. In the second version of 'Paul Morel', to use Lawrence's working title for what became *Sons and Lovers*, Lawrence continued to produce a highly fictionalised reworking of autobiographical material, using his own experiences in the figure of Paul. A large section of this manuscript survives, including the death of the father after he has killed an eldest son (a character who does not find his way into later versions) in a domestic dispute. Now Lawrence's early experiences of love are used in the text. Paul's relationship with Miriam proceeds along similar lines to the finished text but she is lifted into the middle class. Lawrence was beginning to think about his family life and his early experiences of love, and something told him that there was a close relation between the two – that they were part of the same theme and deserved a place next to each other in the same work of art – but as yet he did not have a model that helped him explain the connection.

Lawrence showed parts of this second version to Jessie Chambers, his first lover, and the basis for Miriam. It was part of a strategy over the coming years to submit the work to people who had either known him, or who had complete detachment from his early years, in order to gain their responses. Not surprisingly given her own emotional investments, Jessie Chambers focused on the triangular relationship between Paul's mother, Paul and Miriam. She felt strongly that Lawrence's mother had been a major impediment in her relationship with Lawrence, and she wanted this reflected in the novel. In identifying this as an issue she was beginning to offer a way the narrative of the parents and the early loves could be linked. Generally, Jessie advised Lawrence to recommence the novel, sticking to what had actually occurred and including such material as the life of Lawrence's dead brother, Ernest.

This Lawrence did in the third, and penultimate, draft of the novel. The writing of this version, in late 1911 and early 1912, coincided with a remarkable change in the course of his life. Still holding down a teaching job in Croydon, and a short way into the new draft, Lawrence fell seriously ill with pneumonia and nearly died. After recuperating on the south coast he returned to his home town of Eastwood in Nottinghamshire having resolved to try and earn his living by the pen. He resigned his teaching job, ended his engagement to Louie Burrows, and planned to spend time in Germany. His writing had put him in touch with leading figures in the London literary world; particularly important was his friendship with Edward Garnett, the literary advisor to the publishing firm Duckworth. Lawrence was leaving his background – and the way in which his peers lived and earned their livings – and joining the community of writers. This meant that Lawrence gained more distance from his early experiences, and enjoyed the consequent gains of insight.

The major event of this time of change in late 1911 and the first six months of 1912 was still to come. Lawrence asked his old professor at Nottingham's University College, Ernest Weekley, for advice about teaching assistantships in German universities. Invited to Sunday lunch but finding the professor was not there when he arrived, Lawrence started talking with Weekley's wife, Frieda. After a brief acquaintance, Frieda was to go to the Continent with Lawrence, and in time to decide to leave her husband and children more permanently: after divorcing Weekley she married Lawrence in 1914. Frieda Weekley was German, and of a minor aristocratic Prussian military family. (She was a von Richthofen, and a very distant cousin was to become famous during World War I as the flying ace the 'Red Baron'.) Frieda gave Lawrence an awareness of developments in the German-speaking intellectual world that was to be as important for the novel as Jessie Chambers' advice about sticking close to life. According to Frieda's account of their first meeting she and Lawrence talked about the effects of early childhood on later life, and about Oedipus, within twenty minutes of meeting. She remembered in later life that 'understanding leaped through our words' (Frieda Lawrence, p. 4). Frieda had been involved in an affair with Otto Gross, an early disciple of Freud's, and so was in a position to give Lawrence access to an interpretive model for the events addressed in the novel, in particular that his early love for his mother had continued for too long and stifled his early relationships. It is not only, then, that *Sons and Lovers* can be interpreted psychoanalytically – as one reviewer claimed as early as 1915 (Draper, pp. 76–80) – but that psychoanalytic understandings, albeit at some remove from Freud himself, informed the very composition of the novel.

Lawrence worked on the third version of the text while these life-changing events were occurring. Only a number of small sections of this version of 'Paul Morel' survive but by the end of this period Lawrence would have been moving away from the understanding of events he had when starting the third version only months earlier. The text must have cried out for redrafting; at this stage of his life, though, Lawrence needed money. He sent the manuscript to the publishing house Heinemann. The response came back from William Heinemann himself who rejected the novel on the grounds that it would offend the circulating libraries. Heinemann personally had feelings of repulsion, commenting that 'the degradation of the mother, supposed to be of gentler birth, is almost inconceivable' (*Letters I*, p. 421, n. 4). His reaction captures the shock and newness of Lawrence's novel.

Heinemann's prejudices surprise us today, but they meant that Lawrence decided to draft the novel again one more time, and to work through into the text the new understandings he had gained. It was with this last version that the more thematic title 'Sons and Lovers' replaced 'Paul Morel'. Thankfully, the final version is not a schematic interpretation of events after the new models – the strong bond with the mother is still depicted positively. However, when he had finished the text, and he wanted to defend it as a coherent work of art, it was the new line of approach to his material that he used to justify its form in a letter to Edward Garnett (Duckworth were now to publish the novel),

> I tell you it has got form – *form*: haven't I made it patiently, out of sweat as well as blood. It follows this idea: a woman of character and refinement goes into the lower class, and has no satisfaction in her own life. She has had a passion for her husband, so the children are born of passion, and have heaps of vitality. But as her sons grow up she selects them as lovers – first the eldest, then the second. These sons are *urged* into life by their reciprocal love of their mother – urged on and on. But when they come to manhood, they can't love, because their mother is the strongest power in their lives, and holds them . . . As soon as the young men come into contact with women, there's a split. William gives his sex to a fribble, and his mother holds his soul. But the split kills him, because he doesn't know where he is. The next son gets a woman who fights for his soul – fights his mother. The son loves the mother – all the sons hate and are jealous of the father. The battle goes on between the mother and the girl, with the son as object. The mother gradually proves stronger, because of the tie of blood. The son decides to leave his soul in his mother's hands, and, like his eldest brother, go for passion. He gets passion. Then the split begins to tell again. But, almost unconsciously, the mother realises

> what is the matter, and begins to die. The son casts off his mistress, attends to his mother dying. He is left in the end naked of everything, with the drift towards death.
>
> It is a great tragedy, and I tell you I've written a great book. It's the tragedy of thousands of young men in England ... Now tell me if I haven't worked out my theme, like life, but always my theme. Read my novel – it's a great novel. If *you* can't see the development – which is slow like growth – I can. [*Letters I*, pp. 476–7]

This is a useful and often quoted account of the novel and its themes, but it is not the book we read. It makes overt what is not stated directly in the novel, and when, anyway, other views of the early experiences are still present in the text. One of the main achievements of the writing – and, generally, of the novel form over reasoned prose – is that different understandings are kept in suspension in the same text. Lawrence also says that this narrative has a wider significance, that Paul's early experiences are like those of many other young males. Further, the letter is defensive in its attempt to head off possible criticism from Garnett, whose view of the novel was heavily influenced by the French novel and the line of modern writing stemming from Flaubert. Lawrence believed in organic growth towards complex thematic integration, and not unity of intent and formal structure. The coherence of what is said is prioritised over the 'art' of how it is presented. It may well have been for this reason that the greatest supporter and practitioner of the view of writing held by Garnett, Henry James, addressing the new generation of novelists in 'The New Novel, 1914', had Lawrence and *Sons and Lovers* in the 'dusty rear' of the best new writers and texts. (James p. 252)

So far I hope to have presented an account of the novel's development as a history of shifting understandings of early experience which find their way into the final version. The reader, this suggests, has to think about the understanding (or understandings) of events in play *at that place in the text*, and to ask how they are being led to accept one view rather than another. Take the opening chapter of the novel, for example. The description of the family's time at the wakes demonstrates that William has a split self from an early age. He wants to go to the fair, to engage with the world, and yet he needs his mother's presence and approval if he is really to enjoy it. When she decides to go home he is 'cut to the heart to let her go, and yet unable to leave the wakes' (p. 6). The narrative voice is able to interpret this event with an easy confidence. But the representation of the marriage of Walter and Gertrude Morel is much more complex. The bad side of Morel is made evident in his failure to pay the bills and the violent behaviour when drunk towards the pregnant Gertrude. But there is already in this chapter some space given to what makes him attractive, including those

things in his character that led her to marry him, and his pleasure in work. (The latter is to be picked up in two short but particularly moving scenes: the description of his early-morning routine before he goes to the pit and the scene where he and his children make fuses – pp. 25–6, pp. 57–8.) There is some muted analysis from the narrative voice of what might be wrong with Mrs Morel's approach to the marriage: she is not 'content with the little he might be', rather she 'would have him the much that he ought to be' (p. 16). However, while we are presented with some material that gives us an insight into Walter's position, the narrative voice supports Mrs Morel's view. An example of this is provided by Morel's return home on the night of the wakes. He has been helping behind the bar of a pub, and returns with a coconut and some gingerbread for his wife child,

> He laid the gingerbread and the cocoanut, a hairy object, on the table. 'Nay, tha niver said thankyer for nowt i' thy life, did ter?'
>
> As a compromise, she picked up the cocoanut and shook it, to see if it had any milk.
>
> 'It's a good 'un, you may back yer life o' that. I got it fra' Bill Hodgkisson. "Bill," I says, "tha non wants them three nuts, does ter? Arena ter for gi'ein' me one for my bit of a lad an' wench?" "I ham, Walter, my lad," 'e says; "ta'e which on 'em ter's a mind." An' so I took one, an' thanked 'im. I didn't like ter shake it afore 'is eyes, but 'e says, "Tha'd better ma'e sure it's a good un, Walt." An' so, yer see, I knowed it was. He's a nice chap, is Bill Hodgkisson, 'e's a nice chap!'
>
> 'A man will part with anything so long as he's drunk, and you're drunk along with him,' said Mrs Morel.
>
> 'Eh, tha mucky little 'ussy, who's drunk, I sh'd like ter know?' said Morel. He was extraordinarily pleased with himself, because of his day's helping to wait in the Moon and Stars. He chattered on.
>
> Mrs Morel, very tired, and sick of his babble, went to bed as quickly as possible, while he raked the fire. [p. 8]

Lawrence captures wonderfully, including the brilliant ear for the Nottinghamshire dialect, how Morel is a man at home with his friends and at one with his community. Happily drunk he still remembers his wife and children and he wants to pass on his pleasure to them. But Mrs Morel, using standard English, articulately probes and questions his actions and his drinking. The narrative voice supports Mrs Morel's position, with Walter's speech described as 'babble'. Indeed at times it even takes on her tone, as in the irony of the phrase 'the cocoanut, a hairy object'. To make this point must not take away anything from the seriousness of domestic violence, or to suggest that the scenes which

show Mrs Morel's suffering should be glossed over. However, the reader is given enough material for a fuller sense of Morel's position within the marriage, and given the opportunity of seeing how his own home is alien territory to him, a place apart from the working-class community where he, unlike his wife, is wholly at ease. Later Morel is to claim, with some justification, that his wife has set the children against him (p. 53). The material for this counter-position is placed in the novel by Lawrence, though the sympathy of the narrative voice is with Gertrude Morel.

There are some positions, though, that are less well represented in the novel than that of Morel. All the interpretations of experience later on in *Sons and Lovers* place the young male protagonist at the centre of the narrative. From a feminist perspective it is important to think about the two lovers of Lawrence associated with his Eastwood years, Jessie Chambers and Louie Burrows, and how young women are represented in the novel. Jessie's different views of events were born in mind by Lawrence, but she still felt it important to publish in the 1930s, under the pseudonym E.T., her book *D. H. Lawrence: A Personal Record*. It gives her account of the years when she knew Lawrence, questioning the way she had been 'fixed' by Lawrence as 'Miriam'. By 1913 she had written a parallel novel to *Sons and Lovers*, which she later destroyed while it was still unpublished. Sleeping with Lawrence had, in fact, been a tremendous risk for Jessie – something that does not get its due weight in the novel. Contraception was less effective then than now and pregnancy, or even discovery of the sexual relationship, would have meant the end of her teaching career – for her the only possible way to independence. In the text Miriam accepts Paul's reassurances about precautions with improbable speed (p. 246). Louie Burrows made anguished comments in old age on her engagement to Lawrence. She annotated a letter Lawrence had written to Garnett about the way Lawrence had terminated the engagement. (It appeared in book form in 1962.) At one point she contests *his* account of *her* reaction, commenting with a pain that is intensely moving because it was clearly undimmed by the passage of fifty years, 'I was simply dumb with misery.' The novel itself sees Lawrence imposing interpretations on the lives of these women and is Paul-centred. Many readers feel unease about Paul's return to Miriam in 'The Test on Miriam' chapter, with John Worthen calling it 'one of the most ruthless things he ever wrote' (Worthen, p. 357). What right does Paul have to diagnose her as having a problem, and to conduct a sexual experiment on her? Indeed, Paul appears to displace his own difficulty with 'spirituality' on to Miriam.

The novel is less successful from Chapter XII on, with the exception of the description of Mrs Morel's death, perhaps the most moving account

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in literature of how the seeming opposites of loving someone and assisting in their death can converge. It is interesting to note that Lawrence gives the long account of the relationship of Paul with Clara Dawes very little attention in his letter to Garnett about how the novel has 'form'. The relationship between Paul and Clara shows the attraction to Paul of a sexual partner who is other and different – different in particular from his mother and his family.* In structural terms it can be argued that Lawrence needs to provide some space before the death of the mother and then to reorientate the novel back towards Paul at the end. The events surrounding Paul, Baxter and Clara are invented. It is a strange triangular relationship, with Clara being given back to Baxter at the end almost as a kind of erotic gift. There is an undertow of physical desire behind the violent hatred in Paul and Baxter's relationship.

After his illness at age sixteen Lawrence went back into education. In the novel Paul returns to the surgical-stocking factory. In modernist writing many authors make novels from their own life experiences, particularly in early life. But while *Sons and Lovers* can be linked in this respect to Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914–15) or Marcel Proust's great *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–27) there is a telling difference. Paul Morel may be a gifted visual designer but he is not somebody who will live from his art or think of himself as 'an artist'. *Sons and Lovers* is not about the remarkable, exceptional individual, who leaves family and social group to become a writer. Lawrence avoids the danger of self-conscious pretension in 'the youth of the artist' narratives that haunts Joyce's project. But there is the possible charge of a sleight of hand because *Sons and Lovers* nowhere declares that it is drawing on the early life of someone who quickly left his background behind. Lawrence was the first great writer from the industrial working class, something made possible by the (limited) educational opportunities opened to his generation by the 1870 and 1902 Education Acts. However, education and his pursuit of a writing career took him away from that class. By the time the final draft was written he was living on the Continent with a German aristocratic woman. Lawrence always opposed and felt awkward about the self-consciousness of the artist, but if he sought to suggest that his own experience was 'ordinary' and typical of the Nottinghamshire coalfield then that must be questioned.

Sons and Lovers has been judged, rightly, as marking an advance over Lawrence's first two novels, *The White Peacock* (1911) and *The Trespasser* (1912). There are a number of developments beginning to show through

* Freud argues in his essay 'On the Universal Tendency of Debasement in the Sphere of Love' that the mother provides a model of correctness for the maturing male child who will therefore find sexual fulfilment with a woman less 'refined' than his mother.

in *Sons and Lovers* that were to contribute to the success of *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1920), often held to be the two most important texts by Lawrence. He was to claim in 1913 that he had to throw over the style of *Sons and Lovers*, which he held to have been full of 'vivid scenes' (*Letters II*, p. 142). But, despite the disclaimer, the symbolic scene, used to show the deeper disposition of feelings beyond the surface flux of events and deployed with such force and skill in the later writing, is in fact a technique Lawrence was developing in *Sons and Lovers*. It is a way of investing ordinary people's lives and the events in them with great intensity. An example here would be two scenes where Paul and Miriam look at flowers. In the first of these scenes Miriam's approach to the wild rose tree takes the form of a spiritual communion; at this stage Paul is simply 'pained' by this (p. 138). The lack of a sensual response prefigures Miriam's 'problem' with sexuality. In the scene where they look at daffodils Paul attacks her for 'wanting to pull the heart out of them' (p. 190). There are two ways of viewing such writing: Lawrence is either showing Paul's increasing awareness of Miriam's attitude to sex, or he is unfairly using his writing skills to build the case against Miriam. The main symbolic scene in the text occurs when Paul and Clara have sex by the in-flood river Trent (pp. 267–70). If the sexual symbolism of the river and the crushed carnation petals no longer seem like a new writing style to us today, this is because Lawrence has been paid the dubious compliment of bad imitation. Some aspects of the novel, though, seem at odds with the views we associate with the mature Lawrence. The angry opponent of industrialisation in later work accepts the pits as a fact of life in this novel.

Sons and Lovers, then, is a text of the 'between' – between Lawrence's understandings of his upbringing, between other people's interpretations of these events, between early and mature Lawrence, and at once introducing a new way of writing while not sitting together easily with the 'modernists'. In recent years *Sons and Lovers* has become a text of the 'between' in new ways. The reader is now placed between competing versions of the text, and there is a sense too that it is between readerships. Those unfamiliar with the world of heavy industry and the kind of working-class communities they produced form an increasing majority of readers.

To talk about the new texts of *Sons and Lovers* that have been made available since 1991 it is first necessary to return briefly to the textual history of the novel, and to what happened to it after Lawrence had finished the final draft in late 1912. He sent it to Garnett, mounting the defence quoted above. Garnett suggested cuts of about a tenth of the manuscript: Lawrence accepted the excisions and subsequently even dedicated the novel to Garnett. But whether that means that Lawrence

wholly believed in the wisdom of the cuts is another matter, as he needed the money that publication would bring. The cuts to the novel suggested by Garnett took a number of forms. He thought the novel was too long, and he removed weak passages. At times he held that Lawrence was underscoring his point too heavily, making the novel overly didactic, for example in making William's life story a warning of what could happen to Paul. There was also some censorship of the novel's depiction of sexuality. Some of these cuts seem helpful to the novel's effectiveness; some, such as the censorship, are clearly to be regretted. The Cambridge University Press Lawrence edition text of *Sons and Lovers*, edited by Helen and Carl Baron, used the original uncut manuscript as its base text. Subsequent editors have disputed this decision. The older text has long been in circulation – the version read for eighty years – and most critics of the novel have referred to it. The long-used text is the one printed here, though some editors return to the 1913 first edition, tidying up any printing errors that crept in subsequently. The point is, surely, that rather than pursuing a myth of a perfect and pure single text, keen students of the novel need to engage with multiple *texts* of *Sons and Lovers*, and be aware of how our understanding of the material changes when we move from one text of the novel to another.

For many years after it was published *Sons and Lovers* spoke to young working-class people, in particular, with considerable force. Everyone knew that the coalfields and heavy industry were a visible and important part of British national life. But things have changed and for many younger readers the world of *Sons and Lovers* is distant and different from their own. Whatever background people have, though, they need to negotiate their relationships with parents, siblings, social groups, gender and sexual identities. Given Lawrence's ability to capture the intensity and complexity of that experience in the novel form, *Sons and Lovers* will long retain its special place among texts that address maturation.

Looking back on his early life and on *Sons and Lovers* from the 1920s, Lawrence changed his understanding of the events once more. He came to valorise the insouciant old England he believed his father represented and to loath the self-conscious manipulation of others he came to see in his mother's behaviour. His wife Frieda recorded him as saying, 'I would write a different "Sons and Lovers" now; my mother was wrong, and I thought she was absolutely right' (Frieda Lawrence, p. 56). Any attack on her, though, would have been just as one-sided an understanding of his early life as one that took on her view. But there is evidence that Lawrence later drew the conclusion of these competing understandings of the same experience. One of the most enthusiastic

reviews he ever wrote was of a book by the American psychoanalyst Trigant Burrow. Burrow had moved towards the idea that in human relations we engage not with another person as they really are, but with the image we have of them, and other people engage with the image that they have of us. Any experience involving a group of people will therefore involve multiple understandings and accounts. The closest to 'truth' that a text like *Sons and Lovers* can attain is that it captures as many of the understandings of events in circulation as possible and minimises the distortions of fantasy. When judged against such criteria *Sons and Lovers* emerges as a truly remarkable book.

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