

Sons and Lovers

A 'version'

Trevor Griffiths

D H Lawrence's coalfield novel was first published in 1913. To mark its centenary, Spokesman are republishing Trevor Griffiths' screenplay of Sons and Lovers, which was broadcast in seven episodes on BBC television in 1981. This sympathetic adaptation, much of it shot in and around Eastwood, Lawrence's birthplace, received wide acclaim at the time. Eileen Atkins, as Gertrude Morel, and Tom Bell as her husband are particularly memorable as the enduring if warring couple at the head of the family. Curiously, the series was never repeated on the BBC, although Stuart Burge's serial drama makes for compelling television to this day. Trevor Griffiths reflected on all this work, done during the early years of what was to become Mrs Thatcher's lengthy premiership, in his introduction to the screenplay.*

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On location filming in Nottinghamshire, sheltering from rain, teeth chattering with cold, eyeball to eyeball with the vast impossibility of everything connected with the project, I once more go over (the sodden season's perpetual pastime) the reasons I had given myself two years earlier for undertaking a television version of Lawrence's famous novel. They seem, as the cloud-cap thickens and the wind flaps and ripples under the actresses' plastic hair-shields, even less convincing than on the last review I made of them ... an hour or so earlier.

Ahead, down the blackbrick 19th century street of working-class houses, the unit

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chippies continue their patient attempts to disguise or dismantle the present tense (aerials, antennae, plastic piping ...), Cnuts to a man. Costumed extras, miners' families for the day, stand role-less, out of their time, on the narrow pavements. History squirms and twists, glints and is gone. It's now, we're here, that's that.

All productions know something of this bleakness, of course; especially those that have seriously sought to reconstitute a past social reality out of the present's scarce and resistant materials (of which English seasonal weather in season is but one among many). And there is, in all production, a phase when detail and the professionals' quest for verisimilitude force meaning, value and purpose into the background, become objects in themselves and for their own sake and blot out the larger vision. All this I knew, as I moped, but the knowledge remained abstract, unusable, and did nothing to retrieve the dismal lack of purpose that seemed suddenly to have enveloped us.

As happens, something happened. As we began to shoot, under a weedy sun the colour of faded lettuce, and the street began to thicken with reconstructed lives, an American journalist down for the day asked if I realised how lucky we were in Britain to have these perfect and loving reconstructions of period housing 'maintained and set aside' for historical filmwork of this kind. In America, she went on, the whole street would have had to be built on a studio lot out of plywood and plastic. She'd often wondered how our classic serials always managed to *look* so good, but now she understood it. A truly civilised society should always be prepared to finance the imaginative recovery of its past, etc.

When my mouth finally closed, I knew it was what I needed: the wood within the trees. Seventy years ago, when these streets were already old, cramped and confining, Lawrence had railed against them and against the economic system that made them possible:

'The great crime which the moneyed classes and providers of industry committed in the palmy Victorian days was the condemning of the workers to ugliness, ugliness, ugliness ... the human soul needs actual beauty more than bread.'

Much of the best writing, including *Sons and Lovers*, had been informed by this sense that the real face of capitalism was ugly and inhuman and that the world it reproduced in its image denied the potentiality for human growth in most of its inhabitants.

And yet, beyond the antennae, the plastic piping, the modest dormers, the Ford Escorts parked out of sight round the corner, these same houses

and the working people persisted in their millions around the country, the angering perpetuation of a divisive and exploitative system's dehumanising entailments. Lawrence's mother had lived and died in such a house, in such a street; as had my own; and distant relatives still dwell in them. For them, 'historical reconstruction' lies one insulting whisker's width from 'present reality'. It was enough. We *would* finish. It *would* be as good as we could make it. It would, with whatever imperfections, speak of these things.

As I've already suggested, *Sons and Lovers* is a work of autobiographical fiction that charts, with extraordinary fidelity, the events, circumstances and social relations of Lawrence's early life. Written between 1910 and 1912, it covers the period 1875-1910 through the lives of a mining family in Bestwood (Eastwood) in Nottinghamshire, and especially through the emerging moral consciousness of Paul Morel, the novel's central figure, whose life differs in few important details from Lawrence's own.

It was a life filled with complex stresses, contradictions, tensions, frustrations; its terrain an endless borderland of frontiers, some geographical, others social, cultural, all of them fortified, all of them beckoning. Eastwood itself was one such frontier, a tight industrial village community on the northern border of a great provincial town (Nottingham) and flanked, an hour's walk west, by the centuries-old fields, hill-farms and woodlands of south-east Derbyshire.

But the tensions for Lawrence, as for Paul Morel, were not merely the familiar ones of town and country, of industrialism and agriculture, but of urban and rural against *education*, itself a major pull in the long struggle for self-definition. Within the family, the key elements of class-difference and class-perspective caused further fractures and torsions. Lawrence's father, like Walter Morel, was a miner, apprenticed at 11 and destined to spend the greater part of his life underground, on his knees, in two- and three-foot seams, hacking coal out for his pittance. Lawrence's mother, like Gertrude Morel, was of middle-class burgher stock whose family had come down in the world since the 1839 slump in the lace-trade. Along these and other borders, Lawrence's life is shaped and buckled; and it's through these borders, at the novel's close, that Paul uncertainly bursts, as Lawrence had done before him, in the stumbling search for social harmony and human love.

Much happened to Lawrence in that flight, which took him far beyond the provenance of *Sons and Lovers*. But it was a journey made possible, in ways that may now seem ironic, by the success of his first major novel and

his acceptance, cultural if not social, into the ‘autonomous’ world of art and literature. Great works follow: *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love*, remarkable plays, brilliant novellas and short stories. But the grail of a social utopia possessed him always, pushing him onwards and inwards as the tap-roots of his early life shrank and shrivelled. Germany, Italy, Australia, Mexico, America: the prophet sinks in a maddening wilderness, nursing the demons of fascism, authoritarianism and anti-labourism, the miner’s son whose seam has given out. It is hard to forgive, but not to understand, the rantings of his last phase. Just as it is hard to understand, let alone forgive, those who fail to recognise the bright humanity of the achieved best.

In 1930, when he was just 45 years old, he stood in his latest utopia and looked upon the world.

‘The moment I saw the brilliant proud morning shine high up over the deserts of Santa Fe, something stood still, and I started to attend ... In the magnificent fierce morning of New Mexico one sprang awake, a new part of the soul woke up suddenly, and the old world gave way to the new’, he wrote.

Weeks later he had crossed his last border, killed by the bacillus he had contracted as a young man in Eastwood, dead of his beginnings. And there is something there of them even in the voice above, something fierce and abiding in the ache for human perfection in nature (including society), which grew from the soil of the early proletarian life. The ache persists, and the anger that drives it. It’s a voice that may not amuse you as much as your favourite television critic’s; but you will never hear it cynical, and it won’t be easily silenced.

I want to finish by clarifying a few things about the serialised version of the novel of *Sons and Lovers*. The serial differs from the novel in two important but distinguishable ways. Most obviously, there are the differences born of trying to incorporate a 500-page novel into a six-and-a-half-hour time slot. Much that is rich and textured has gone, where it has not been needed to support the narrative or serve the social relationships of the characters.

The second difference between the novel and the serial drama derived from it is both more important and more difficult to theorise. Realistic novels, especially by Lawrence, work differently from realistic plays. *Sons and Lovers*, though ostensibly a third-person novel, frequently presents events, relationships and people through the consciousness of its central figure Paul Morel (who, as we have seen, is a version of the author himself). Since no comparable relationship to Paul existed for me in the

dramatic re-working, it proved pointless to seek a dramatic device that would support one. My interest in the difference I'm trying to account for lies in the way Paul – and all his social relationships – become *objectified* within the form of realistic drama. (Put another way, realistic drama demands that characters shall be both subjects and objects. Hence, as Paul's subjective view of the social reality is de-centred, so the other characters' perceptions acquire a newly charged subjective dimension.) Revelations ensue, each one a subtle shift in the flow of meaning, a redistribution of effect, a rupture with the prevailing protective empathy that urges the reader to see Paul as the subject and perceive his world – family, work, friends, lovers, problematic – through his eyes and, often unthinkingly, at his valuation.

And the shift in formal focus affects, in some cases as crucially, all the other characters in the piece. The Walter Morel that emerges, for example, is now as much victim as anyone else and, incidentally, much closer to the 'father' that Lawrence revalued towards the end of his own life. Gertrude, Clara, Miriam, too, all undergo a significant re-making in our minds, as the plays centre them for the first time as subjects within the structures of their own lives.

So it's as well, and probably more honest, to call what you see a 'version' – a particular form or variant of the novel in question – and have done with it. For those who have not read it, the novel waits. I envy you.

I began with talk of reasons and will end with a little more. Why, finally, Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, now, and in Britain? There are many answers, big and small, but one will have to suffice. I chose to do this work because, under all the incipient mysticism of the perception, under the incipient derogation of women, under the increasingly ugly politics, there is, in *this* Lawrence, and vibrantly so, a powerful and radical celebration of dignity in resistance within working-class culture in industrial class-societies; as well as a dark, tortured cry against the waste of human resources such societies require as part of their logic. It is no bad thing to be saying when unemployment has reached over three million.