International Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics
ISSN: 2689-9450
Volume 5, Issue 2, 2022 (pp. 57-66)
www.abjournals.org

READING *SONS AND LOVERS* THROUGH OBJECT RELATIONS THEORY

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Cite this article:

Jianing Li (2022), Reading Sons and Lovers through Object Relations Theory. International Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics 5(2), 57-66. DOI: 10.52589/IJLLL-7SRDV2JD.

Manuscript History

Received: 9 July 2022

Accepted: 6 Aug 2022

Published: 2 Sept 2022

ABSTRACT: *This paper dissects Paul Morel's various female and male relationships portrayed in Sons and Lovers by dint of object relations theory. In the course of the investigation, it is gradually revealed that the paradigms of son-mother and son-father relationships reverberate throughout Paul's life, from which none of his other relationships can be freed. In the final analysis, Paul is only a symbiotic infant caught up in the smothering repetitions of a rash of unsuccessful relationships which he fails to see through till the bitter end. Yet, the vicious cycle in Paul Morel's life does remind us how repetition can serve as a game-changer at the same time---identifying it alone is the springboard for freedom---that is the ultimate significance of repetition.*

KEYWORDS: object relations theory, abnormal symbiosis, repetition, mother, father, relationship

Article DOI: 10.52589/IJLLL-7SRDV2JD
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/IJLLL-7SRDV2JD

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking of *Sons and Lovers* and psychoanalytic approaches, the Oedipus complex is very likely the first thing popping into mind---the tremor sent by such a deeply-embedded yet hard-to-miss sort of sexual drive can still be felt after all these years. This paper, still within the psychoanalytic framework, however, is intended to look at the son-mother and son-father relationships, among other connections, in the light of object relations theory.

In order to lay the theoretical groundwork for later discussions, the paper's first section is devoted to a brief synopsis of object relations theory, including its broad definition and its significant application in real-life relationships. The second section seeks to examine the nuanced relationships between Paul Morel (the protagonist) and the female characters through the theory and distil a uniform relationship-pattern functioning behind it. Naturally, the main focus of the third section will be shifted to the relationships nurtured by Paul and the male characters. The last section, in an effort to bring all the previous analyses together and further widen the lens, attempts to explicate why pernicious repetitions can be turned into good account and why fiction has the potential to be used as psychodramas to shed light on the black box of ourselves---the invisible human psyche and the apparent reality, and a good many mysterious correlations in between.

Section 1 Object Relations Theory

Object relations theory, if considered properly, should concern a large school of scholars, each indispensable with their own distinctive arguments. This fact practically denies the term a singular and unequivocal definition. Despite its inherent complexity and heterogeneity, ambiguity and confusion, it can still be recognised as a proposition 'exploring the relationship between real, external people and internal images and residues of relations with them, and the significance of these residues for psychic functioning' (Mitchell and Greenberg, 12), or be taken more precisely— 'every person forms an internal sense of self and other that has been shaped largely by one's interactions with primary caretakers. In turn, these conscious and unconscious views of self and others influence our perceptions of others and our behaviour towards others' (Basham and Miehls, 92).

Premised on the basic description mentioned above, it is not unreasonable to deduce the following conclusion: how people interact with others in adolescence and later adulthood corresponds to how they interact with their nurturer in childhood. In most cases, the female nurturer is primarily the child's mother (the matriarch in one's nuclear family) and the male nurturer is the child's father (the patriarch in one's nuclear family). Therefore, the original object relations theory can be further refined and detailed in this direction: the way children deal with their mothers can find its symbolic parallels in the manner in which they deal with other females later in life, particularly the older women; and it is the same with the male side. The concrete similarities vary enormously with individuals and circumstances, and sometimes the resemblances are so striking that the mystical sense of repetition makes people wonder how we keep returning to the starting point despite ourselves and how we can end this cycle if it is poisonous.

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Section 2 Paul with the Female Characters

Throughout *Sons and Lovers*, not counting Paul's mother Gertrude Morel, a succession of women passed through Paul's life, either leaving their sharp marks or just serving as citizens in the street. Before subjecting some of them to thorough scrutiny, we shall first pore over the relationship paradigm of Paul and Ms Morel, setting the stage for its sneaking reoccurrence later in Paul's relationships with other females.

There are two main dimensions to measure such an intense and solid son--mom relationship. Firstly, by the overall impression after reading for the first time, one might remark that they are on good terms, or perhaps, too good to be normal. The general tone set between them is fairly harmonious. Such comment contains more than a grain of truth since the heartfelt love conveyed between Paul and his mother is by no means a subtle thing, which to all appearances is forceful enough to mask the simmering tensions underneath. "The harmony" which presents itself between Paul and Ms Morel can again be felt strongly in Paul's association with the factory females, a group of women who all adore Paul very much, and vice versa. Polly, among them, is the prominent one who warrants a special mention.

Though relatively short in length, Paul's interaction with Polly is telling and revealing, through which the heavy hand of object relations theory is quite observable. Amid all female friends, Polly represents the most clear-cut analogue to Ms Morel. Much as Ms Morel who is the matriarch at home, the 'brisk overseer downstairs' (Lawrence, 127) of forty can also be viewed as a matriarch in the factory. Besides, they are both little and erect in body, 'proud and unyielding' (9) in temper. The most peculiar symmetry, however, should be the homely harmony they both share readily with Paul---He often calls Polly 'a robinet [sic]' (128) (i.e. a little robin), just as he affectionately calls Ms Morel 'my pigeon' (354); he feels he belongs to Polly (128), and likewise he 'feels possessed by his mother' (Rodden, 35); the peaceful image of a quiet Paul sitting and chattering with Polly for hours in the factory recalls instantly the charming tableau of a pensive Paul baring his soul to his mother beside the warm kitchen fire. Indeed, the boy's intimacy and closeness with his mother find their way to his relationship with Polly, but the latter is much tenderer and softer, with all the impalpable strain winnowed out.

Undeniably, Paul's ability and eagerness to develop rapport with women shines through, which stands to reason considering his deep attachment to his mother. Especially in the factory, Paul likes 'the girls best' (Lawrence, 127) and thus is 'drawn to and influenced primarily by women rather than men' (Rodden, 34). In other words, Paul is inclined to be absorbed by women, always a popular figure in female company, in all likelihood much more popular than his male acquaintances will acknowledge.

Now revert to the second dimension "quality". By quality, however, such a son-mom relationship is hard to be deemed "good". Rather, it is more like a noxious bond, all tangled up and woven into a toxic knot. Trying to be more specific and clear all unwanted cobwebs away, I prefer to apply the phrase "abnormal symbiosis" to describe the real nature of the relationship in question. Here, "symbiosis" is actually a professional psychological term borrowed from Margaret Mahler, who used it in her separation-individuation theory of child development to designate an early period, starting from the second month after an infant's birth to about the sixth month, when 'the infant behaves and functions as though he and his mother were an omnipotent system---a dual unity within one common boundary' (Mahler et al, 44). In this what Maler named 'the phase of normal symbiosis' (44), two crucial yet competing features

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prevail: on the one hand, the infant is exceedingly narcissistic, seized by absolute hallucinatory omnipotence, but on the other hand, it relies utterly on the mothering person to satisfy its needs (44-46). The curious combination and collision of these two aspects result inevitably in a mental paradox---the infant believes it is the reigning king who possesses the power to control and do whatever it likes, whereas, in the meantime, the infant is too fragile to exert its wishes and leave its mother so that it has to be shackled to her, willingly or not. If an infant is stuck in this state psychologically, that is, this mental paradox persists when it should weaken and vanish over time, the once "normal symbiosis" may gradually rot into an abnormal one as has been noted. When later the child carries it into adolescence and adulthood, he (or she) may still behave like a symbiotic-stage infant, powerless to be self-assertive, inadequate to steer the life course, while obsessively fixated on the mother figure. The cost of such obstinate fixation with symbiosis can be dear and painful, as Paul's instance will later provide a snapshot.

Before moving on, the reason why I consider Paul is afflicted severely by the abnormal symbiosis should be revealed first by means of the following excerpts (all italics are mine):

> [Paul] had *come back* to his mother. […] It was as if the pivot and pole of his life, *from which he could not escape, was his mother.* […] And he *came back to her.* And in his soul was a feeling of the satisfaction of self-sacrifice because he was faithful to her. (Lawrence, 260-261)
>
> "There's certainly no reason why you shouldn't," said Mrs Morel, and she returned to her book. He winced from his mother's irony, frowned irritably, thinking: "*Why can't I do as I like*?" (381)
>
> But he felt he had to conceal something from [his mother], and it *irked* him. There was a certain silence between them, and, [. . .] *he felt condemned by her*. […] *His life wanted to free itself of her*. […] She bore him, loved him, kept him, and his love turned back into her so that *he could not be free to go forward with his own life*, really love another woman. (406)
>
> [His mother] was with him still. […] Looking at her, *he felt he could never, never let her go. No*! (471)
>
> Who could say his mother had lived and did not live? She had been in one place, and was in another; that was all. And *his soul could not leave her, wherever she was*. Now she was gone abroad into the night, and *he was with her still. They were together*. (495-496)
>
> […] "I don't know. *I shall hardly go for long, while there's my mother*."
>
> "You couldn't leave her?"
>
> "*Not for long.*" (415; a conversation between Paul and Clara)

Taken together, the foregoing extracts are actually all variations on one theme---Paul cannot leave his mother, either physically or spiritually, in the same way as a 2-6 months old infant must be bound up with his symbiotic partner to survive. Every 'come back' is a resonant announcement of his incompetence to leave. Not to mention leaving his mother bodily, Paul can hardly bear the thought of hiding something from her. Having secrets 'irked' him. Leaping

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off the page is not an independent adult proud of his own freedom, but a rather stunted one enfeebled by the morbid symbiosis, who fails to exercise both his body and will successfully. He desires to go abroad, but 'not for long' while there is his mother; he leaves his mother out of his sexual secret and thus feels 'condemned by her', ending up with a guilty conscience; even in the last chapter, when his mother 'was gone abroad into the nigh', his soul still belongs to her, root and branch. His mental peace can only be achieved by loving her best and giving his all to her faithfully.

If Paul Morel were nothing but an unfeeling automaton devoid of any personal volition, he might not be so troubled and wounded by his situation. The moan 'why can't I do as I like' is not so much an offhand complaint as a deafening wail from the depths of his being. Yet, predicaments are ineluctable in his young life since the irreconcilable clash lingers---the yearning to do what he likes, the incapability to fulfil it, and the perceived obligation to stay with his mom, heart and soul. The inner clash or the vestige of an abnormal symbiotic state is the very relationship paradigm I have referred to at the beginning of this sub-section. As expected, such an ingrained relationship paradigm will cast a doomed spell on all the romantic relationships he has, but woefully, it seems to be a spell he knows not how to break no matter how hard he strives.

In evidence, Paul Morel ploughs through two major romances before the novel comes to a full stop. Unlike Paul's relationship with Polly, which reflects mostly the ostensible placidity without any interior struggle, his entanglements with Miriam and Clara are far more complicated and elusive, in which the object relations theory can easily find its expression. While both women are of great value in Paul's young life, it is Miriam's involvement that can disclose more shades of his female relationship paradigm, or to put it more bluntly, Paul treats Miriam more like his mother than his lover, which may explain the exclusive concentration this sub-section will direct to her.

From the very outset of the novel till its bitter end, Miriam and Paul seem to be trapped in a revolving door between break-up and make-up. What is more interesting, though, is the fact that Paul himself initiates each break-up and later each make-up, altogether three times. On a closer survey, there is an odd pattern constantly in play: Paul approaches Miriam; Paul restores their old love; Paul stays and hovers around hesitantly; Paul frets restlessly and draws silently away; Paul splits up with Miriam; Paul comes back to her. When depicting their convoluted relationship in this way, it is now noticeable who is the larger planet and who is the satellite set desperately in its orbit.

At first glance, truly, the Miriam figure can't help conjuring up the profile of a kneeling worshipper, a devout disciple, or in Paul's own words---'a holy nun' (294); she is his 'threshing-floor' (266), letting him 'trample his ideas on her soul' (266). Nonetheless, in this relationship, however fond she is of Paul and however resigned her own temperament is, Miriam is not the one submitting to the domination, being deprived of freedom, but quite the opposite, she attracts Paul like a magnet and it is Paul that cannot afford to leave her (all italics are mine):

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www.abjournals.org

> [Paul] *could not leave* her, because in one way she did hold the best of him. (294)
>
> But [Paul] *belonged to* Miriam. Of that, she was so fixedly sure that he allowed her right. (295)
>
> [Paul] still kept up his connection with Miriam, could *neither* break free *nor* go the whole length of engagement. And this indecision seemed to bleed him of his energy. (301)
>
> And, deep down, [Miriam] had hated him because she loved him and he dominated her. She had *resisted his domination*. She had fought to *keep herself free of him* in the last issue. And she was free of him, *even more than* he of her. (348)
>
> Even [Miriam] had guarded her soul against him. She was *not* overthrown, *not* prostrated, *not* even much hurt. She had known. (351)

Although in their second love affair, that is, when it is no longer a lad-and-lass love, it is pointed out that Paul 'courted her now like a lover' (334), in effect, much like their first one, Paul still treats Miriam like his mother. The only difference is that, compared with his younger self, this time he is much surer of the nullity behind their love— 'It was useless trying: it would never be a success between them' (343). Yet, even with such stark knowledge that he will never have Miriam and that they are not the right match, he still fails to tear himself entirely away, just as he must stick to his mother no matter how fiercely his own will fights against hers. As a result, in this gruelling swirl of leaving-and-coming, he forces himself to love Miriam as a wife, to accept the idea of their marriage, and to pretend their efforts are not futile. Nevertheless, as it turns out at last, his labour is just Sisyphus-like, and even more tragic than Sisyphus, he is not nearly an absurd hero---in the event, he is only an overgrown infant punished by the abnormal symbiosis and an unsuspecting victim of a manipulative repetition he never sees through.

Apart from the above study of Paul's failure to leave, a comparison drawn between the manners in which Paul concludes his final links with his mother and he parts with Miriam in their last encounter also carries a goldmine of information. After Ms Morel's health falls into a terminal decline, Paul confides to Clara that he does not want his mother to eat and wishes she would die (458). Then, he literally practices euthanasia on his mother and takes the initiative to invite the irreversible departure, which on the surface contradicts his earlier "can-not-leave" mental activities in every way. My personal interpretation is that, precisely because he cannot leave her but she has to, he would rather take matters into his own hands and drives her away. In some senses, he manages to keep his inward balance intact by sacrificing his mother's life, since only thus can he maintain the illusion of "I make her leave but I never leave her" and push on with his own life.

In his last meeting with Miriam, it seems that his mind follows the exact same track:

> She could only sacrifice herself to him---sacrifice herself every day, gladly. And that *he did not want*. […]
>
> He felt, in leaving her, he was *defrauding her of life*. But he knew that, in staying, stifling the inner, desperate man, he was *denying his own life*. And he *did not hope* to give life to her by denying his own.

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> […]
>
> "I think I must go," she said softly. (494, italics mine)

The dilemma Paul confronts this time is actually similar to the one he addresses in his mother's last days. In the church, his heart reaches out to Miriam for the third time and he invites her over, all unmistakable signals of his inability to leave her on his own. For all that, 'staying with her' to him still feels like 'denying his own life' and he certainly does 'not hope to give life to her by denying his own'. In consequence, he rejects her sacrifice and makes her go away, consciously 'defrauding her of life', so that his inner peace can be preserved. From this perspective, his ultimate handling of Miriam is virtually identical to that of his dying mother, which reminds us once again how merciless yet accurate the object relations theory can be.

Section 3 Paul with the Male Characters

As expected, the handiwork of the object relations theory is manifested in Paul's relationships with male fellows as well. Along the same lines, as we plumb his female relationship paradigm, this section will also tackle the relation-prototype first---Paul's relationship with his father, Walter Morel, on which all other Paul-and-male relationships will be modelled afterwards.

"Ambivalent" appears to be the favourite word critics tend to use when it comes to Paul's mixed feelings towards his father. Beyond a doubt, the alternate hatred and affinity, which are summed up as "ambivalence", race all their way through Paul's childhood, his adolescence, and his earlier adult life until the feelings between them wear so thin that 'there was scarcely any bond between father and son' (484). On one level, Paul does hate his father, but such boyish hostility against the elderly man is more like a form of loyalty for his mother, a variant of anxiety and insecurity triggered by Walter's uncertain behaviour, than a visceral and hearty repulsion surging up from the bottom of his heart. Real aversion or not, great distance has thus suspended between them regardless, and neither the son nor the father feels the necessity to bridge the gap. On another level, however, Paul does care for him, but such tender feelings are still tinged with other negative kinds, like fear, apprehension and weariness, as the snippets below will show:

> At six o'clock, still, the cloth lay on the table, still, the dinner stood waiting, still, the same sense of anxiety and expectation in the room. [Paul] *could not stand it* any longer. He *could not* go out and play. So he ran into Mrs Inger, next door but one, for her to talk to him. […]
>
> The two sat talking for some time, when suddenly the boy rose, saying:
>
> "Well, I'll be going and seeing if my mother wants an errand doing."
>
> He *pretended* to be perfectly cheerful and did not tell his friend what *ailed* him. Then
>
> he ran indoors.
>
> Morel at these times came in churlish and hateful. (72)

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www.abjournals.org

As a child, Paul fervently prays that his father will "stop drinking" (70), that will 'not be killed at pit' (70), and is frequently unnerved by his father's absence and coarseness, which bring him much distress and distaste. Moreover, his mother's growing sense of disenchantment with her marriage adds another thick layer to Paul's concern for his father, urging him to learn to love his father carefully. Truth to be told, this careful type of love can be a difficult one, which first, must not rebel against his unswerving loyalty to his mother, so it is not allowed to be demonstrative; and second, it must be kept at arm's length since Walter Morel's 'brutal manner' can be 'dangerous' (72) ---in fact, the boy is only granted the rare opportunity to 'unite with' (74) his father in the work, when his father is 'his real self again' (74). All things considered, the paradigm of son-and-father's relationship can be outlined as such: since his birth, Paul has been conditioned to like and dislike his father simultaneously, and his thwarted love can barely counter his strong tendency to nurse grudges against the old man.

The traces of this original relationship paradigm are re-echoed once and again in Paul's relationships with other males. For example, a quick glimpse at Paul and his brothers, William and Arthur, can tell that they are nowhere near as connected as Paul with his sister, Annie. Of William, Paul was 'unconsciously jealous' (80), and of Arthur, Paul directly conceives as 'a fool' (210). Yet this is far from the case with Annie, even though the three grow up in the same household---being a little boy then, Paul 'belonged at first almost entirely to Annie' (67), always 'flew beside her, living her share of the game' (67).

Then in the factory, the same relation-template is perpetuated. Paul's proclivity to have issues with men still stands in marked contrast to his readiness to forge close ties with women. To Mr Jordan, the patriarch of the factory, he takes an instant dislike in their first interview, quite contrary to the warmness he feels towards Polly, the little overseer. Even though as time goes on, Paul comes to count him 'very decent' (305), the whole cohort of factory men still remains low on Paul's totem pole of affection, being 'common', 'rather dull' and 'uninteresting' (127), and for every reason, Mr Jordon is among the foremost. However, it is amid Paul Morel's pitched battle with Baxter Dawes that the son-father relationship paradigm is on the fullest display. (all italics are mine):

> Paul and he were confirmed *enemies*, and yet there was between them that peculiar feeling of *intimacy*, as if they were *secretly near* to each other, [...] And yet the two never looked at each other save in hostility. (402)
>
> Paul had a curious sensation of pity, almost of *affection*, mingled with *violent hate*, for [Dawes]. (405)
>
> There was a feeling of *connection* between the rival men, more than ever since they had fought. In a way, Morel felt *guilty* towards the other, and more or less responsible. And being in such a state of soul himself, he felt an almost *painful nearness* to Dawes, who was suffering and despairing, too. Besides, they had met *in a naked extremity of hate*, and it was a *bond*. (448)
>
> Between the two men, the *friendship* developed peculiarly. Dawes, who mended very slowly and seemed very feeble, seemed to leave himself in the hands of Morel. (456)

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This male-male bond is arguably the weirdest one among all the relationships Paul has entered. If we separate alone Paul's affection for Dawes, it seems not much of affection, but more towards resentment; but then, if we single out the antagonism wedged inside, it seems not much of an antagonism either, but more towards the sentiment of fellow feeling. Either way, the so-called ambivalent feelings are thus laid bare at their most characteristic. Grounded in the above-listed pieces, their relationship is likely to run the whole gamut and subtle gradations of human emotions, explicitly or implicitly: pity, affection, hate, guilt and pain; but among them it is the convergence of violent hate and covert affection that holds sway. Obviously, it is cast in the same mould as Paul's relationship with his father, but this time, the author appears to blow up both the benign side and the malignant side of the latter one, lending more intensity to making "nearness" painful and enmity "a naked extremity".

Across the spectrum from amity to animus seething between them, the negative end is understandably more acceptable, since Dawes in essence is Paul's rival in love and they are engaged in the same triangular drama. As with the careful love Paul cherishes for his father, the secret endearment at the other end is also a watchful one, owing to the fact that Dawes can turn equally dangerous, and that their intimacy is eternally partitioned by Clara, the woman in-between. Yet, it is plain that the unusual fellowship is shaped as they happen to meet in the same "suffering and despairing" state of the soul.

Section 4 Fiction as Psychodrama---the Healing Power Within

For ages, psychoanalysis has been grouped into author-centred approaches in literary terms. Indeed, following the first publication of *Sons and Lovers* is the remarkable outpouring of reviews oriented toward Lawrence's personal life, his philosophy, his inner conflicts and more or less, his psychic structure. Through the agency of manifold psychoanalytical theories, we can always locate an author's own shadow somewhere between the lines and among the words. From this point of view, using the psychoanalytical approach as a medium can be immensely effective to lever opening an author's heart---but is its function merely limited to getting in touch with the author's true inner self? To take the case of reading *Sons and Lovers*, many are tempted to use it as an eloquent testimony of Lawrence's life metaphysics, yet only few will hold it as a mirror, to draw an analogy or distinction between Paul Morel and ourselves.

In the preceding sections, I have made some passing references to "repetition", or the unbroken spell in Paul's life. As has been elaborated previously, the paradigm of Paul's relationship with his mother creeps into his other female relationships repeatedly, and in some way predetermines the endpoints. Unsurprisingly, the paradigm he produces with his father does not leave his other male relationships alone either, infusing recurrently the direction they are heading into. To put it succinctly, every relationship Paul later fosters bears the imprint of its most original one, or in Mahler's words, every 'new phase of the life cycle sees new derivatives of the earliest [intrapsychic] processes still at work' (3).

Truly, the intrapsychic process can be such a cruel and cunning thing, which 'is never finished' (3) and 'remains always active' (3). On no account can we discern it with the naked eye. Yet, fortunately, it leaves a way out. The external repetition, which we can detect, is its embodiment, its exclusive spokesperson, issuing the warning shot that we might be caged somewhere in our psychological growth. As Paul Morel's tragedy alone can testify. if he can at least be aware of the ceaseless repetitions he is locked into, he may have the freedom to break off the shackles and really makes his own way.

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Based on this understanding, repetition can be profoundly transformative and beneficial, if noticed opportunely. It also constitutes the encouraging force behind psychodrama therapy, in which people intentionally recreate some pivotal episodes from their past, and by re-experiencing them all over again, they gain penetrating insights into their life---that is how the healing begins. Fiction can also be read as man-made repetitions. Even though the ongoing repetitions can hardly be the exact replicas of reality, we can still see our own dusky reflections lurking inside, not only the authors'. That is why I am convinced that fiction is another form of psychodrama, only much milder, since we are just spectators "admiring" the show instead of the real actors involved. Still, the milder one has its own advantages, because different from psychodrama therapy, it permits some space between ourselves and the imaginative figures, where we can see the unrolling plots clearly, but not stay too near to be traumatised.

That being said, however comparable the two may seem, if we want fiction to start acting like psychodrama, the first step should always be looking inwardly and taking note of the evoked emotions. After all, fiction sharpens the irony and helps crystalize the enigma. Unlike Paul, who is somewhat "blind" to his own quandary, we are possible to pinpoint his underlying problem and account for his warped mental status. To put it another way, everyone reflects some aspects of Paul Morel but enjoys more liberty than he has, and by availing ourselves of this liberty, we can start to curb the repetition that plagues us no end.

CONCLUSION

The object relations theory sketched in Section 1, I have to reiterate, is a highly-condensed version putting aside copious details, but nevertheless, it offers enough information to help me anatomize Paul and clarify his miscellaneous relationships in a less traditional fashion. Via this theoretical tool, the central thread that weaves all sections together is enabled to go from Paul's abnormal symbiotic mental state, his relationships with his mother, the factory women, and Miriam, to his relationships with his father, his brothers and the factory men. With microscopic attention, we reach the conclusion that the son-mother relationship refracts itself in his other female relationships and this finding is equally applicable to the male ones, demonstrating the point of object relations theory. The last section raises the idea that fiction can command the healing power of psychodrama---both are products of repetition, allowing us every possibility to change if we are prepared to look inside.

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Article DOI: 10.52589/IJLLL-7SRDV2JD
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/IJLLL-7SRDV2JD