

The Weight of the Gertrudes of Literature: Motherhood, Desire, and the Oedipal Dynamic in D. H. Lawrence and Shakespeare

Juhi Singh*¹

¹Lecturer in English, Shree Agrasain College, affiliated to the University of Calcutta, WB

*Corresponding Author: juhi.singh0825@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the roles and treatment of two notable figures named Gertrude, in the literary domain: one from the Morel family and the other from the Danish royal family, presenting a comparative analysis, aiming to reveal the source of conflict from Elizabethan Age to the Modern Period, from external to internal. Their commonalities i.e., the shared name and the portrayal of Oedipus complex, make them significant points of discussion, even though the two works are set in different eras. In comparing the two, the article analyses the significant influence of the setting that prompts the supposed actions taken by these characters, investigating all these pertinent areas in relation to the title, as well as the questionable decisions that create psychological ambiguity. At length, the paper highlights how Gertrude from *Hamlet* and Gertrude from *Sons and Lovers* serve as determining figures, challenging anticipated viewpoints.

Keywords: *Gertrude, examine, Sons and Lovers, Hamlet, Oedipus complex, portrayal.*

INTRODUCTION

In literature, certain characters are built upon certain traits. These archetypes are visibly repeated when it comes to characters who share the same name, portrayed in similar fashion. Gertrude, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the Queen of Denmark, is one of the most widely discussed and critiqued figures in literature. She is a character that has been reassessed from different lens umpteen times. This has led to diverse interpretations as a result of diverse perspectives, thereby serving as a source inspiration for Lawrence's the later work. The purpose of this paper is to elucidate the questionable attributes found in Shakespeare's as well as Lawrence's work. The paper not only seeks to examine these characters individually but also by juxtaposing their shared stances to analyse their points of commonalities and dissimilarities. The emphasis here lies on the similarities between these characters, despite being created in different centuries, periods, settings, contexts, and backgrounds. A pivotal element is the exploration of the Oedipus Complex manifested through both the Gertrudes.

GERTRUDE IN SONS AND LOVERS

Considering the challenges that Gertrude Morel faces in her marriage to Walter Morel, her intricate personality becomes somewhat understandable, if not entirely so. The novel's setting further contributes to this complexity. Her marriage to Mr. Morel, which began with fervour, deteriorates as her husband becomes abusive and succumbs to the negative effects of alcohol, nearly losing his masculine authority as Gertrude assumes a dominant role. Lawrence uses physical illness as a manifestation of psychological stagnation. The unattractive softness, less-manly approach of Walter, the father, loses out to the dedicated, hardworking, responsible son Paul. Lawrence's work illustrates the attraction of opposites, suggesting that these two men are fighting for a single prize. Mrs. Morel's intriguing characteristics align more with her son than with her own 'predictable' husband (Mehra, 2019). Gogoi (2014) suggests how Paul, whether intentionally or unintentionally, remains unwell for the majority of the time, resulting in his continual proximity to his mother, who holds him in her embrace. This physical closeness to

his mother's warmth rejuvenates his health. However, this act occasionally appears to be more blatant than necessary. What could have been a typical interaction between a mother and her son leaves the reader puzzled, given that both are adults and persistent rejection of similar affection from the outside world. Her position as the family's matriarch turns toxic when her nurturing instincts for her children extend to the point of preventing them from seeking love outside their home, resulting in her insecurity regarding the women her son is attracted to. Surprisingly, what could have been or should have been condemned by her sons is rather met with agreement. Paul feels guilty for trying to build loving relationships outside of home, as is natural for a young man. This leads to a fall out between Paul and his love interests. It is important that we look at Gertrude the character, before analysing her as Gertrude the wife, or Gertrude the mother. Similar to Lawrence's other female characters, Gertrude too has been showcased as an exceptionally strong woman, on whose shoulders the Morel family stands. She runs the business as well as the household chores. In every sense, she stands as an unyielding figure, standing by her choices, whether right or wrong, while having a strong hold on both her sons, William and Paul. Her character in the novel stands uncorrected throughout, except the very end of the novel, for she is never questioned by her sons. A plausible reason for this is the presence of a weak father figure in opposition to a strong, opinionated mother figure. This absence of a patriarch eventually gives way to the dominance of the matriarch.

GERTRUDE IN HAMLET

Freud's analysis suggests that the play is basically about a son's repressed desire for his mother. He approached the play through the lens of the Oedipus myth, viewing it as a modern echo. Time and again several critics have indulged themselves in discussions pertaining to the role of Gertrude, whether she was an outright contemptible character or a victim of her circumstances. She could be seen by some as an individual with no other option but to choose the only path accessible and profitable to her. However, it becomes impossible as an audience to not judge her by her actions, that of a manipulative mother and wife, making it challenging for the audience to dismiss the idea that she did not bring it on herself. Her very own son, Hamlet, condemns Gertrude for marrying his uncle following his father's death. What makes the situation worse is the assertion that she could possibly have had a hand in the killing of her late husband. The character of Gertrude stands as one of the most distinguished female characters of Shakespeare, met with hate, disgust, and pity. Mohanraj (2025) rightly states, "her presence in *Hamlet* has historically been interpreted through the lenses of male characters—primarily Hamlet and Claudius", as she is mostly viewed through Hamlet's perspective.

Hamlet's dialogue "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (Shakespeare, 1603/1914, p. 15), almost echoes throughout the Golden Age of drama as well as texts that are modelled on similar characterizations. With respect to Gertrude's character, there is moral ambiguity because it is truly never revealed whether she played a part in the former King's death, leaving the audience uncertain, in a transitional space, failing to label her as a villain or victim. Hamlet avoids Ophelia because of the revulsion he feels at his mother's marriage to Claudius and the hatred that arises from that relationship. Gertrude appears to be largely unaffected by the death of her first husband, from stating "Do not for ever with thy veiled lids seek for thy noble father in the dust. Thou knowst 'tis common; all that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity" (Shakespeare, 1603/1914, p. 13), to her fixation on her son, is evident. Her character appears to be accustomed to the pleasures of status and comfort, despite being labelled an adulteress. Both the audience and her son experience struggle due to the emotional distance between them, a gap created by Gertrude's own decisions. The character of Gertrude in *Hamlet* is not only objectified by society but also by her own son, who serves as her harshest critic. She is a character who faces scrutiny, particularly from a patriarchal viewpoint (Al-Ali, 2015, p. 93).

Gertrude's character is surrounded by an air of mystery, neither portrayed a saint nor a villain. This mystery is stretched to the very end as the audience is not led into her thoughts as is possible in the case of Hamlet, through his soliloquies which expose all his vulnerabilities. Hamlet is our only lens, a male perspective, who may or may not be biased in case of his mother. Since she does not talk to her audience directly and plays her part both as a victim and a villain, it would not be wrong to consider her a 'grey' figure. After her marriage with Claudius, her second husband, she is caught in a tug-of-war like situation, made to deal with both her grieving and emotionally charged son, and on the other hand her new-found position beside Claudius, maintaining the role of a supportive wife, ensuring stability. When applying the Oedipus theme in this context, this mother and son bond stands as obsessively uncomfortable, as depicted in the later scenes of the play.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Technically speaking, from the point of psychoanalysis, as argued by Freud (1900/1995), the Oedipus complex is said to surface between the ages of three and six. Therefore, we must examine the characters of Paul Morel, William Morel, and Prince Hamlet, to analyse specific patterns, relevant to understand the root of their fixations, subconscious desires that have long been suppressed and only manifest in the case of the respective works, when the boys grow up. The situation arises when the role of the man of the house seems replaceable, as seen in both *Hamlet*, and *Sons and Lovers*. It could be asserted that the feelings that were supposed to manifest early, according to Freud's study, in case of *Hamlet* and *Sons and Lovers*, were left untreated or unaddressed, shaping into something unhealthy.

A push-pull dynamic becomes apparent, observing that both the works heavily draw upon the Oedipus complex, clearly making it difficult for the Gertrudes, who are the object of attachment. The relationship between Gertrude Morel and her sons is suffocating. The mother who pours all her hopes and affections onto Paul while he struggles to create bonds with other women. There are moments of frustration but the string always pulls Paul closer to his mother like never before. In case of Hamlet, he chastises his mother for her sin against his father, but more importantly against himself. Hamlet's tragic flaw, in a way, stems from his inability to punish his very own blood, his own mother, weakening him to take a stand even against Claudius. Both Hamlet and Paul distance themselves from their Lovers, remaining close to their mother, carrying out their roles and more, till the very end. Hamlet's pulling away from his partner Ophelia takes place out of a general disdain for women following his mother's marriage to his uncle and his doubts regarding her involvement in his father's murder. In contrast, Paul is driven by a romantic attraction and emotional attachment to his mother, leading him to reject the girls in the town.

According to Freud (1900/1995), the complex in focus here begins around the age of five for a boy, who develops feelings of animosity towards his father due to the jealousy he experiences when observing his father's closeness to his mother (Fromm, 1949). In contrast, while Hamlet's childhood is not explicitly explored, and the Oedipus myth only becomes apparent in his adulthood, particularly after Gertrude's second marriage, this phenomenon is prominently illustrated in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. Lawrence provides insight into the familial dynamics that led to the patriarch's inability to uphold his authority, resulting in Gertrude Morel seeking solace in her sons. Notably, the element of jealousy from the son's perspective is almost absent, as the father does not play a significant role from the outset. The mothers in this context exhibit a 'vampiric' nature, emotionally draining their sons dry, who are plagued by an unsettling sense of tormented minds and indecision, creating a tense, uncertain atmosphere throughout its course. The narrative moves, in parts, by the sons' stealth to save their Gertrudes from the counterforces, such as Claudius in *Hamlet* and Miriam in *Sons and Lovers*.

Gertrude Morel, a passionate woman, assumes the role of the jealous figure with her sons acquiescing to this dynamic, if not willingly, then with relative ease. In both instances, *Sons and Lovers*, and *Hamlet*, the shared theme is the absence of a father figure for differing reasons, which compels the sons to assume that role, as in the case of Oedipus the King. They not only provide for the family but also seek to support their mothers, not merely as sons but by attempting to fill the void left by their partners. As the son emulates the father and desires to be by the mother's side, he matures into someone who seeks similar characteristics in the women he becomes involved with. In D. H. Lawrence's novel, Paul struggles with finding qualities he seeks in his partner, both Miriam and Clara fail to provide him an overall personality fulfilling all his points, while he grapples with finding the right partner, there exists a strong claim on him, that of his mother, to the point that it makes Paul feel guilty, almost as if he crossed a line. Neither of the two women make him feel complete, directly or indirectly letting him align with his mother with the same sense of passion. In *Hamlet*, the character of Ophelia is overlooked, by Hamlet, who otherwise proves to be essential to the plot. The curator of her tragedy is none but Hamlet, who fails to see the 'damage' he has caused her. Even his grief over Ophelia's death is only short-lived, overshadowed by the cloud-figure in his life, his mother, leaving him confused and blinded by rage. The profound undecidability of Hamlet suggests that his tragic flaw may stem from his feelings for his mother, which hinders him from avenging his father, who has been wronged in multiple ways. This emphasizes the significant role Hamlet assigns to his mother compared to the deceased King.

Jocasta, both mother and wife, finds her reflection in the Gertrudes discussed here. Although her character is more prominent in *Hamlet* than in *Sons and Lovers*, parallels can still be drawn. Jocasta takes her own life upon the revelation made by Oedipus, unable to endure the truth and continue living. The relationship between Mrs. Morel and Paul is distinct from that of Jocasta and Oedipus, given that the latter's union occurs without their awareness, which is not true for the former. There is an urge, a responsibility for the sons, in *Sons and Lovers*, to live up to their mother's expectation in the novel, wanting to please her. In *Hamlet*, the main character is cast into a 'pitiless bottom' by his own mother, left desolate and tormented, grappling with the chaotic circumstances surrounding him, confronting his own hamartia, his inability to decide. In contrast, in *Sons and Lovers*, Mrs. Morel, akin to the head of the household, takes it upon herself to secure employment for her son, with all her efforts being reciprocated in kind and even more. The sons within the Morel family are laden with the love, care, possessiveness, and attention of their mother, who not only fulfils her own responsibilities but also those of their father. Neither of the Gertrudes can be verified as villains. They are complex figures, burdened by their moral failings, the root of their hidden guilt. Their characters are driven by questionable decisions that dictates the stories pace.

The self-imposed punishments depicted in Oedipus The King are terrifying upon the revelation of the truth, while in *Sons and Lovers*, our main characters feign a moral connection. What is even more surprising is the continual satisfaction that Mrs. Morel gains from the attention and the perplexed, guilty condition of Paul (Gogoi, 2014). In contrast, Queen Gertrude navigates her life while exhibiting a sense of suffering throughout the narrative, grappling with the complexities of her newly formed identity, which leaves us uncertain whether to perceive her as a perpetrator or a victim. In contrast to Jocasta, Mrs. Morel's position appears less tragic because she is fully conscious of her deep emotional attachment to her sons, first to William and then to Paul, remaining steadfast in her behaviour. When it comes to her son, Paul, he reflects the same feelings, which is clear in the line. "Sleep is still most perfect ... when it is shared with a beloved." (Lawrence, 1913) indicates the comfort Paul finds in sleeping beside his mother, which is absent in his romantic relationships. Gertrude Morel and Paul Morel do not share a traditional mother-son relationship; what they share is a psychologically complex relationship, completing each other through a deeply emotional exchange, as that of lovers,

reflected in their shared moments in Nottingham, “feeling the excitement of Lovers having an adventure together.” (Lawrence, 1913). They lean on each other as a result of what Lawrence highlights as ‘blood consciousness’, only strengthening their relationship as opposed to outside forces. The unexplainable intimacy that the two possess pulls Paul back to his mother, resulting in his failure to free himself from the grasp of his mother. Surprisingly so, Paul feels the need to seek validation from his mother, experiencing a sense of guilt every time he engages with Miriam or Clara. His relationship with the two women mentioned, lacks completeness, a hollowness filled by Gertrude Morel, the ‘other woman’ in this context, contending with Miriam and Clara, for her position beside Paul. He feels a sense of responsibility to justify his actions to his mother, assigning her the role of a stay-at-home wife, who needs reassurance from her partner, highlighted in an instance when Paul states, “I talk to her, but I want to come home to you.” (Lawrence, 1913) Towards the end of the novel, realization hits Paul that it is his own mother who has hindered him from fully living his life. As the young man that he is, Paul is kept away from experiencing the joys of adulthood with no sense of liberty, the touch of true genuine love. He remains encapsulated by jealousy, emptiness, indecision, only gaining clarity at the concluding sections of the novel. This awakening brings a radical reaction from his end, giving Gertrude an overdose of morphine, to end her as well as his own suffering, in an instance.

Hamlet is plagued by a sort of paralysis, in his inability to take action, extract vengeance that he is consumed by. He remains unsuccessful in taking any action against the people he showcases apparent disgust for the most part of the play. He struggles to determine whether to seek revenge for his father's death or to hold back, possibly for the sake of his mother, despite the clarity of the situation before him, as emphasized in the text “You are the queen, your husband’s brother’s wife; And, would it were not so, you are my mother.” (Shakespeare, 1603/1914, p. 92). The audience is left to ponder whether Hamlet desired Ophelia solely for her access to him following his father's death, harbouring resentment towards his mother for her choice of Claudius. In *Sons and Lovers*, Paul, the son, perceives no shortcomings in his mother and instead seeks to satisfy her with all his endeavours (Al-Ali, 2015, p. 91). However, the situation is quite different in *Hamlet*. Hamlet's primary worry revolves around his mother's union with Claudius, even prior to learning about his father's unlawful murder. Paul's love for his mother Gertrude Morel renders him incapable of seeing her flaws, which is not surprising since he is also part of the problem. Ophelia’s troubled mind, Paul’s pneumonia, and Gertrude’s cancer, are the physical illnesses that hold these characters down with weight, manifesting as psychological illness. The characters of Claudius in *Hamlet* and Walter Morel in *Sons and Lovers* act as catalysts in bringing the sons’ repressed desires to the surface. The sight of Gertrude reminds Hamlet of his own ‘sullied’ desires. Because of Hamlet and Oedipus’ unaddressed guilt, Hamlet serves as a direct parallel to the original myth. *Sons and Lovers*, on the other hand, functions as a modern resonance of a tormented subconscious desire. With the instinctive turn of the mothers towards their sons, the burden of responsibility is not only laid on Gertrude but also on Hamlet, Paul, and William. They begin to see themselves reflected in the roles played by Claudius and Walter Morel. With Freud’s analysis and the textual interpretation of the two works, it becomes clear that the ‘weight’ is much heavier because they are invisible. This heaviness is a hidden pull, of which the son’s mother is the centre of gravity, destroying the son.

In Lawrence’s novel, the matriarch is the source of the ‘blood consciousness’. Similarly, Gertrude in *Hamlet* represents physical clash between desire (Id) and moral constraints (Superego). Both the Gertrudes are subjected to the same, ill-fated end, an end foreshadowed in *Hamlet* and revisited in Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*, as if the names carried a tragic weight. Gertrude’s death in *Hamlet* seems accidental, while in *Sons and Lovers* the overdose of morphia

is seen as the final, desperate attempt of pathological devotion, acting for both the sons as a liberating catalyst.

CONCLUSION

Gertrude Morel, a modernist figure in the novel *Sons and Lovers*, serves as a reference to Gertrude from *Hamlet*, depicted in a distinctly oedipal manner, despite the fact that this connection has not been explicitly discussed. However, it is clear that both characters converge at a point where their struggles intersect. As stated by Mehra (2019), Lawrence employs the split theory in the novel, illustrating the distinction between the body and soul of the male characters. Although Paul, in contrast to Walter Morel, is perceived as the more masculine figure in the household, he falls short of the societal expectations of masculinity, thereby positioning Gertrude as the matriarch (Mehra, 2019). The character of Gertrude Morel is based on the archetype provided by the Queen of Denmark, both escaping a marriage, entering into a union considered immoral in the eyes of the society in the case of *Sons and Lovers*, while by his own son in *Hamlet*. Therefore, it is essential to emphasize the significant elements present in both of these works. The dense atmosphere present in the two works stems from reprehensible factors in the narratives. Decisions taken by the Gertrudes shape the environment in both *Hamlet*, and *Sons and Lovers*. Although not radically voiced, Hamlet desires for Claudius to not be in the scene. In case of Paul, his mother's approval is his objective, giving meaning to his life. This is where Freudian theory comes into the picture, for he asserts that the oracle's curse is laid upon each one of us from birth, directing a son's first sexual impulse towards his mother and his first hatred towards his father. In both, *Sons and Lovers* and *Hamlet*, Freud's concepts of the id, ego, and superego are evident. Shakespeare's queen and Lawrence's matriarch carry weights that pull their sons into a suffocating, stagnant orbit. These women impose heavy psychological burden upon their sons, to compensate for their failed marriages. Apart from their maternal expectation, they seek to fill the void in their empty lives. There exists the weight of moral ambiguity for the Gertrude in *Hamlet* maintains a silence that is heavier than any weight, haunting Hamlet's psyche. While the other, in *Sons and Lovers*, haunts as the matriarch wanting a silent devotion to his motherly position as if wanting it because it is her right, grooming Paul into deep manipulation who fails to see through. The characters experience the id stage when they are driven by intense passion to satisfy their desires, succumbing to vengeful impulses, and developing a focus on the maternal figure, which leads to a toxic attachment and an overall imbalance in their lives.

The novel *Sons and Lovers*, was published at a time when Freud's take on the Oedipus complex was gaining momentum. While *Hamlet* is often cited as a more direct illustration of Freudian theory, the matching timelines of *Sons and Lovers* and *The Interpretation of Dreams*, cannot be ignored. Another point that Freud (1900/1995) stressed is that with the advancement of civilization, the Oedipus complex shifted from external action to internal repression, a defining trait of modern literature. While Oedipus' desire is fulfilled when he marries his mother, the protagonists, Hamlet and Paul, never reach that stage. With respect to both Hamlet and Paul, the ego stage surfaces in their incapacity to conform as a result of their confused psyche, failing to strike a balance in their lives. Both characters evaluate their actions in light of their shortcomings and guilt when the superego comes into play, serving as a moral compass.

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