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Euthanasia in *Sons and Lovers* and D. H.
Lawrence's Metaphysic of Life

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Euthanasia in *Sons and Lovers* and D. H. Lawrence's Metaphysic of Life

Sons and Lovers, published 29 May 1913, appeared to the general acclaim of reviewers who extolled it as a promising start to the career of a major artist. Examining its prominent ideas, critics in the 1910s and '20s variously described the theme as the degeneration of human relationships (Abercrombie 67), the modern weakness and wastage of human potential (Unsigned 58), but primarily as a portraiture of tragic sexuality (Massingham 63). Its autobiographical tendency was also already highlighted and the novel treated as a piece of "social history" (Garnett 117). The topic on which contemporary critics remained largely silent, however, was that of euthanasia. Louise Maunsell Field was among the few reviewers who commented on the circumstances of Gertrude Morel's death: "Whether or not it was right for Paul to do the thing he did is an open question" (75). The *Irish Times* referred to the "fatal dose of morphia" given by Paul to his mother as "the last kindness he can do." The *Nation* was more analytical: "her actual end is accomplished by him by means of an overdose of morphia, intended, one must believe, not only to relieve her anguish, but his own as well" (*SL* lxx). In a letter to Edward Garnett, John Galsworthy stated cryptically: "But *most* of the Mother's death is magnificent"(54). None of the commentators, however, addressed the truly singular nature of the act and questioned Lawrence's motives for its portrayal. This reticence is also found in many general studies on Lawrence. Gertrude Morel's death is often acknowledged as a fact, but its exact circumstances tacitly ignored.¹

The reason for such discretion may be found in the interpretative cul-de-sac provided by the biographical approach, which prompted the formation of the enduring

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myth of D. H. Lawrence's unnaturally close attachment to his own mother. This bond allegedly blighted his adolescence and overshadowed the rest of his life.² A series of letters written by the author at the time of Mrs Lawrence's death certainly testifies to the intense strain Lawrence was under. As is characteristic of family caregivers of the terminally ill, he felt totally helpless and was stunned by the futility of his mother's suffering. Some letters express this helplessness in words of overflowing emotion,³ others articulate the wish for a quick end.⁴ The end finally came about in ominous circumstances. Meyers, Worthen and Maddox include in their biographies an account of how Lawrence gave his mother an overdose of morphine, an act which would have incurred a criminal conviction for murder, had it been made public at the time.⁵ Even if he justified this deed to himself as a "mercy-killing" engendered by love, and bestowing the gift of a good, gentle death (the literal meaning of euthanasia) on his mother, Lawrence would not escape its consequences. His breakdown in November 1911 is often seen as a belated after-effect of his action, provoked by physical illness but possibly aggravated by the mental anguish caused by grief and guilt. When he came out the other side, Lawrence ostensibly shed the burden of his past (*EY* 324).

The death of Lawrence's mother and that of Gertrude Morel in *Sons and Lovers* are thus treated as corresponding events, forming a clear-cut watershed in his life.⁶ Most early critics seem to find no reason to explore the mercy-killing in any more detail, since its relevance has been exhausted by drawing parallels to Lawrence's life. In fact, Lawrence studies continue to take a uniform stance regarding the emotional damage sustained by the perceived near-incestuous alliance between mother and son and a home-life wrecked by parental conflict (*EY* 56 – 7, 74), of which Lydia's death is the tragic climax. Lawrence's self-image as the offspring of a

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“martyred lady-saint” and working-class “savage,” as Ford Madox Ford remembers it, is the precursor to this line of inquiry (57). The more we hear about the stifling influence of puritan morality, social aspirations and financial strain on the delicate child, the more we are in danger of looking upon the adult Lawrence as monstrous and debilitated by the shame and guilt arising out of his mother's suffering and self-sacrifice—and indeed, those who take their lead from Middleton Murry do so.⁷

However, instead of regarding Lawrence as the helpless victim of circumstance who used writing as therapy, it can be more rewarding to treat his biography more pragmatically.⁸ For no other work is this more important than for *Sons and Lovers*, his “autobiographical” novel, which bridges the events described above. Lawrence started an initial draft when he first became aware of his mother's illness in October 1910, and he finished the final version in November 1912, after his illness, “resurrection” and the beginning of a new life with Frieda. During these two years, the various permutations of the novel chart Lawrence's artistic journey. Initially conceived as a vindication of his mother's life, it became instead an indictment of the lethal damage done to people by those who care for and love them. To this final stage of the novel's development belongs the death scene in which Paul Morel and his sister Annie administer a lethal dose of morphine to their terminally ill mother.

In this respect art seems to mirror life. But in discussing the motivation of the characters concerned or the place of *Sons and Lovers* in specific contexts of its time, biographical criticism reaches its limitations. Perceiving the novel as a simple reshuffle of Lawrence's life into fictional form evades questions regarding artistic intention and detachment as well as aesthetic value, and has led in the past to strange hybrid biographies in which extracts from the novel are used in place of biographical

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evidence.⁹ More discerning critical approaches to the novel do not underestimate it as a work of fiction (Gomme 31). In particular John Worthen's untiring exploration of these issues has paved the way for fruitful inquiry. He emphasizes the importance of construction and myth for Lawrence's creative talent, which tempers the personal and actual with the impersonal and symbolic.¹⁰ This is important if we regard the novel as Lawrence himself described it: as a tragedy.¹¹ The thematic universality of tragedy, its use of human error, frailty and death, its action based on the dialectic of entanglement and liberation, all provide an important clue as to how we should regard Mrs Morel's death in *Sons and Lovers*. It takes us beyond a mere biographical reading into the realms of artistic sensibility and explores the aesthetic, moral and psychological validity of the act.

It would, however, be inappropriate to imply that critics have been totally silent on this matter. In fact, various ideological readings of the novel have included the killing in their critical frameworks as a historical or moral rather than biographical issue. The formalist approach, for example, describes *Sons and Lovers* as a tragedy of the alienated individual (Worthen, *Idea* 27 – 8) and the killing of Mrs Morel as an emancipatory act.¹² Based on the analysis of relationship patterns and viewpoint in the novel, Rylance regards her death as a first step towards realizing Paul's own identity (27), something necessary for his own survival and his emotional and sexual fulfillment. The chapter title "The Release" is thus identified as the release of Paul from the crippling bond that exists between himself and his mother.¹³ However, this angle does not really shed light on Paul's motivation, as he was able to extricate himself from other relationships without resorting to desperate measures. Also the need for the affirmative act in light of his mother's inevitable end is not made

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plausible by this interpretation. The discrepancies these critics have identified in the flawed distinction between narratorial viewpoint and character¹⁴ lead back to the dead end of subjective biography. It seems the only reason for Paul to kill his mother this way is because Lawrence did. Since we cannot know Lawrence's motivation, Paul's will also elude us.

Feminist analysis provides a much more straightforward explanation for Paul's motivation. As Lawrence's mouthpiece, he embodies the author's misogynistic hatred of women.¹⁵ Mrs Morel's death is thus branded a clear-cut murder, an affirmation of male supremacy and a rejection of the mother's spiritual tyranny inhibiting Paul's maleness.¹⁶ A gendered look at Lawrence's writing certainly exposes the often violent fates of female characters, especially in the short stories. Yet pulling together the deaths of these women as if motivated by one single psychological cause, as Ruderman proposes, overlooks one important distinction between these casualties and Gertrude Morel's death: No other character was "murdered" on her deathbed. The singularity of the event is not an aberration but a forceful symbol of the tragic dimensions of the novel and Lawrence's metaphysic of life.

Ruderman's thesis of the pre-oedipal "devouring mother," whose death is necessary if the male character wants to avoid his own destruction (21), extends Freudian criticism,¹⁷ one of the earliest ideological readings of *Sons and Lovers*. Kuttner defines the novel as the tragedy of a son who loves his mother too much and *vice versa* ("Freudian" 368).¹⁸ In both instances the motivation for Gertrude Morel's killing is pushed into the unconscious.¹⁹ Racked with incestuous guilt, Paul kills his mother because his sexual desire can only be fulfilled when she is dead. In the intimacy of the death chamber²⁰ Paul can now openly play the lover to his "virginal"

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bride who, as Weiss notes, will be eternally preserved in death (96). Some critics have rightly reasoned that this presents a monstrous distortion which overshadows Lawrence's attempt at rendering human relationships sincerely (Tiverton 25).²¹

Another interpretation emphasizes the pressure of historical forces on Paul, and describes the novel as a political tragedy of an individual with unfulfilled potential.²² This approach has one advantage over a Freudian or feminist reading: it regards the tensions between Mrs Morel and her sons as far more commonplace. Seen this way, the novel simply describes the conflict within a family at a particular juncture in history when conventional hierarchical and familial patterns were at breaking-point. Holderness finds that the relationship between the individual and society can be a deadly conflict if not resolved (149), and Herzinger declares: "As long as community is absent, self and society must be in a state of continuous conflict" (90).²³ In this context Gertrude Morel stands in the way of Paul achieving harmony with his community.²⁴ He kills his mother in an act of revenge, because her desire for social betterment had already made a victim of his brother William.

All these critical theories provide a convincing angle on Mrs. Morel's death within the confines of their particular ideological reading. What they often fail to explain, however, is why Paul's affirmative act comes so late in the plot development and why its outcome is so ambiguous. An answer may instead be provided by Lawrence's metaphysic. Early critics often readily admit "Mr. Lawrence has small regard for what we term conventional morality" (Maunsell Field 74).²⁵ He was, according to Carey, a natural aristocrat with a Nietzschean horror of Christian charity and compassion (129). Lawrence would not shy away from depicting murder as an inherently moral deed,

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because death itself held no fears for him. On the contrary, Lawrence celebrated it as an important aspect of life, as a transit into immortality rather than an ending.²⁶ His metaphysic can therefore be summarized as being based on the polarity of life and death.²⁷ The mercy-killing of Paul's mother is a necessary universal life-affirming act for the benefit of the dying individual, rather than plain emancipation, self-defense, sexual desire or revenge. It provides the quick ending to the slow "death in life," which for Lawrence was the modern tragedy. Paul is instrumental in bringing about death when it is most needed: at the point when the dying person has become the epitome of anti-life.

First, however, it is important to consider briefly how Lawrence begins to establish his metaphysic of life in his work, and how he returns to it again and again throughout his career. By identifying the topic of "life" and "anti-life" as a recurring theme in his other novels and finding it replicated in *Sons and Lovers*, this work loses its exceptional status as a piece of therapeutic writing and can be placed firmly within Lawrence's intellectual development.

The White Peacock (1911) already provides plenty of evidence for Lawrence's exploration of the "death in life" he deplored. Death features prominently in this muted and pessimistic narrative. Standing over his father's dead body, Cyril "felt the great wild pity, and a sense of terror, and a sense of horror, and a sense of awful littleness and loneliness among a great empty space" (37). This existential horror is exacerbated by the emptiness of the lives depicted. Lettie explains to George that "we should hug our thinning lives" like the tree strangled by ivy (210), but later, as a mother and wife trapped in a loveless marriage, "she puts over her living face a veil,

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as a sign that the woman no longer exists for herself" (284). George, of course, will also by the end of the story lie on his metaphorical deathbed. In contrast to the tree image provided earlier in the novel—a tree which brings forth fruit even in the deadly embrace of the choking climber—he appears “[l]ike a tree that is falling, going soft and pale and rotten” (324). The life-negating atmosphere of the novel is furthermore evident in the deathbed scene of Meg's great-aunt: “The cruel truth is, however, that the old lady clung to life like a louse to a pig's back” (140). Her mechanical and bestial clinging to life adumbrates Mrs Morel's, but no life-affirming mercy-killing can as yet be contemplated, because *The White Peacock* is still permeated by *ennui*.

Yet the main arguments of Lawrence's take on the modern tragedy are already in place. The deathly quality of a wasted life, the refusal of the dying to let go of such a life, and the haunting of the living by the dying are given expression in almost all subsequent novels. A definition of “death in life” is for instance given by Siegmund in *The Trespasser* (1912): “To have no want, no desire: that is death to begin with” (181). But for Lawrence, clinging to such a life when death can provide relief is even worse, thus Siegmund commits suicide. However, the description of Siegmund's self-destruction contains an important historical footnote on the offences of euthanasia and suicide, both of which were unlawful acts before the latter's criminal condemnation was finally revoked in Britain in 1961. Lawrence gives Siegmund a socially acceptable excuse for his suicide, namely that he suffered from severe sunstroke.²⁸ That he made no such provision in the case of Mrs Morel's euthanasia indicates that Lawrence wanted to show the release death brings to those who die without having lived.

Subsequent novels reiterate the theme of the wasted life, mainly but not exclusively, of women. In *The Lost Girl* (1920) “[t]he terrible sound of “never now, never now—it is too late” (26) rings through the plot. Alvina’s mother dies lethargically “of her own heart-disease, poor thing. Wherein lies every moral that mankind can wish to draw” (44). Miss Frost’s death, in contrast, is described as a fight against the inevitable: “[T]he agony of the looks of the dying woman, winsome, and sinisterly accusing, and pathetically, despairingly appealing” (51). The accusation of the dying against the living resurfaces in *Kangaroo* (1923). Somers is haunted by his dead mother in the way Paul is haunted by Gertrude. Yet Somers tries to reassure himself: “But surely his mother was not hostile in death! And if she were a little bit hostile at this forsaking, it was not permanent, it was only the remains of a weakness, an unbelief which haunted the soul in life” (97). The living must shake off the ghosts of the dead and continue living, the dying must continue to die as an acknowledgement of their wasted life. But Carlota’s death in *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) is not allowed to acquire the spiritual meaning she, in her Christian revolt against the living Gods of Mexico, would have relished. It is sordid and lingering, because she stands on the side of “death in life.” When Cipriano admonishes Carlota on her death-bed for having sapped Don Ramón’s life force (347), Kate ponders that “life was a more terrible issue even than death. One could die and have done. But living was never done, it could never be finished, and the responsibility could never be shifted” (349).

Lawrence did not just show the failures in living, but also the triumphs of life and death. Tom Brangwen in *The Rainbow* (1915) brings Lydia back from deathly impassivity towards life, whilst his own fatal drowning reveals the enigmatic nature

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and supremacy of death, leaving Anna and Lydia detached from life and touched by death (233). *Women in Love* (1921) is probably Lawrence's most profound examination of his metaphysic, in which he formulates his idea of death as a catharsis, a cleansing of humanity, through Ursula: "To die is also a joy, a joy of submitting to that which is greater than the known, namely, the pure unknown" (192). This ideal joyous cleansing is contrasted with the "living death" of Thomas Crich (215). His struggle mirrors Gertrude Morel's, in that his iron will clings to life. "He could not bear being overcome by death," and Gerald is appalled at the "uncleanness" of such a protracted suffering (284). This undercutting of the Victorian "beautiful death" for the "dirty death" of material decay is the hallmark of modern literature (Friedman, *Fictional* 78, 81).

In Lawrence's last novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), Clifford Chatterley clings to life despite the fact that he should better embrace a good and gentle death: "[I]t was ghastly, to exist without having any life [...]" (140). Constance is only resurrected by Mellors' love, but the gamekeeper has to fight his own battle against the metaphysical horror. Constance "could feel the black void of despair inside him. That was the death of all desire, the death of all love" (206). This death was earlier anticipated by Siegmund. Once more using the tree-image, Lawrence asserts: "Vitality, the human race is dying. It is like a great uprooted tree, with its roots in the air (2P 510).

"A Propos *Lady Chatterley's Lover*" thus comments succinctly on the metaphysic Lawrence had developed throughout his creative career, and *Sons and Lovers* stands at the beginning of this exploration of the "tragic idea of life," the belief that modern life

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“is nothing but futile conflict” (2P 511). The entrenchment of *Sons and Lovers* with Lawrence's canon furthermore indicates that it is more than a deviation prompted by personal tragedy. This study therefore re-evaluates Mrs Morel's death in the context of the contemporary philosophical-ethical discussion on euthanasia and Lawrence's replication of some of its prime arguments that surface in his general metaphysic and find specific artistic expression in this novel. This is not to say that Lawrence commented publicly on euthanasia or can be held as an active endorser of its practice. However, seen in this context, the singular literary event of euthanasia in *Sons and Lovers* may align some of the recent interpretative detours on the novel and open up critical cul-de-sacs that have been generated in over ninety years of Lawrence criticism.

To be better off in death than in life is a recurring motif in discussions of euthanasia, and this is personified by Mrs Morel, whose “dying day” (17, 106) is foreshadowed by her first disillusion in marriage: “There began a battle between the husband and wife, a fearful, bloody battle that ended only with the death of one” (22). Her male children are implicated in this tragedy. William was born “just when her own bitterness of disillusion was hardest to bear” (22) and Paul's birth is dreaded “like a catastrophe” (50). The baby appears to her “unhealthy, or malformed” (50), but she vouches to love him even more, because he had been conceived in an atmosphere of hate. “She had never expected him to live. And yet he had a great vitality in his young body. Perhaps it would have been a little relief to her if he had died” (90). Lawrence's “tragedy of young men” was that they were engaged in a struggle that depleted their vitality. Paul's story is emblematic of the deadly conflict of a modern generation, a fact even

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his mother later acknowledges: "He had that poignant carelessness about himself, his own suffering, his own life, which is a form of slow suicide" (300). Paul attempts to kick against the deathly quality he identifies in his mother's hold over him. "His life wanted to free itself of her. It was like a circle where life turned back on itself, and got no further" (389). Yet when she dies he senses that "forever behind him was the gap in life, the tear in the veil, through which his life seemed to drift slowly, as if he were drawn towards death" (451). However, unlike Mrs Morel's predestined end, Paul has still a chance to renew "the complete rhythm of life and death," as Lawrence put it in 1929 (*2P* 510).

Mrs Morel's ambivalent stance towards her sons, her anxiety that they should make something of their lives, to see in them "her life's fruition" (77) even though her own life is full of suffering, disillusion and self-denial, is mirrored in Paul's ambiguous empathy, even as a small child. He "almost hated his mother for suffering" (86) but at the same time feels the burden of responsibility. "It hurt the boy keenly, this feeling about her, that she had never had her life's fulfillment: and his own incapability to make up to her hurt him with a sense of impotence, yet made him patiently dogged inside. It was his childish aim" (91). His final act of mercy can thus be seen as a consummation of this aim, because euthanasia, if it is to be a compassionate act, can only truly be performed by someone who loves and cares for the dying person. When finally the day arrives on which he can make good his childhood promise, Paul falls back on an earlier realization "that he was life to her. And after all she was the chief thing to him, the only supreme thing" (251). When he knows that his mother is going to die, Paul steels himself for what he must do. In a symbolic gesture he picks one of her grey hairs from his coat. "He held it up, and it

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drifted into the chimney. He let go. The long grey hair floated and was gone in the blackness of the chimney” (420).²⁹ From this moment on, the novel moves towards its inevitable end. Mrs Morel must not die naturally, but a “good death.”

It is evident that the motives for Mrs. Morel's death are to be found in Lawrence's exploration of the quality of life and death: A deathly life may be resurrected by love, but the characters who have to face the end of their natural life can no longer be saved. Their salvation lies in shedding their deathly life for a good death, even though Lawrence makes clear that most of his characters—symbolic of the decay and corruption of the contemporary western world—fail to yield to death in this affirmative way. It is indicative of Paul's love for his mother that he can extend to her this final grace.

Lawrence does not advocate euthanasia as a political, social or medical choice, but as a preference for life. The same argument concerning the quality of life and death was also central to the debate on the legalization of voluntary euthanasia which began in Britain in 1870. Kemp, who has undertaken what he claims is “the only comprehensive analysis of the British euthanasia movement” (1) emphasizes that the euthanasia dispute at the end of the nineteenth century was “essentially a philosophical enterprise” concerned with challenging Christian definitions of the quality and value of life and death (11).

Even though euthanasia was not widely discussed publicly, various articles were published in newspapers at a time when Lawrence might have encountered them. Van Der Sluis lists debates in the *British Medical Journal* referring to articles in the *Daily Express* in 1904 and the Literary Notes of the *Journal* in 1911 as well as the

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Daily Mail in 1913 (136). This period covers Lawrence's intellectual maturation and it is not unreasonable to assume that he was aware of opinions and arguments intermittently promulgated during that time. We do know, however, that Lawrence was reading Haeckel's *Riddle of the Universe* (Chambers 112) and that he was influenced in his metaphysic by adopting Haeckel's "eternal motion" between life and death.³⁰ Haeckel also wrote on euthanasia in *The Wonders of Life* (Van Der Sluis 138), so Lawrence was primed for the debate through his own interest in the "war of existence."

The debate on the legalization of voluntary euthanasia centres on the aspect of the intrinsic value of life, the ability of patients to value their life and the right to a dignified death.³¹ Lawrence uses these arguments in addition to his comment on parallel developments in the cultural assessment of death. He presents in the novel an inversion of the traditional Victorian death-bed scene, negating the *ars moriendi* through which productive suffering and graceful decline add to the spiritual strength of the saintly dying (Friedman, *Fictional* 73 – 5). Christians oppose euthanasia as being against God's ordinance. Moreover, with its alleged emphasis on suffering, Christianity approves of the spiritual endurance of pain (Kemp 8). Because of the perceived increase in painful deaths from malignant diseases like cancer, inquiries into the "release" of such patients from their pain became more urgent (Kemp 44 – 5).³² Therefore, spiritual well-being had taken a back-seat to the preferred absence of physical pain and suffering by the end of the nineteenth century. The change in medical practice through the discovery and use of analgesia and anesthesia also promoted this new death culture (Kemp 13). Palliative care depended on increasing doses of morphine for the pain relief of the terminally ill patient. Morphine, however,

subdues respiration and could inadvertently cause or hasten death and was therefore the drug mostly implicated in euthanasia.³³ Mrs Morel is given morphine, which relieves her pain but exacerbates her symptoms. She wastes down to a mere skeleton, her heart is affected and her pulse becomes irregular. Paul finally asks the doctor to give her an overdose, but in accordance with medico-ethical and legal standards, he refuses.

Euthanasia in *Sons and Lovers* is thus not a physician-assisted suicide; instead her lingering implicates the family of the dying mother. As participants in the debate on euthanasia foresaw, the step towards a "good death" is complicated by fears of the "slippery slope."³⁴ The rights of the patient clash with the "rights" of the family that has to cope with the suffering. In *Sons and Lovers*, Mrs Morel refuses to go calmly. Her will resists contemplating "altruistic suicide."³⁵ Dying, "[s]he was holding herself rigid, so that she might die without ever uttering the great cry that was tearing from her. [Paul] never forgot that hard, utterly lonely and stubborn clenching of her mouth, which persisted for weeks" (429). Paul is utterly destroyed by this defiance. He opens his heart both to Clara and to Miriam. "—She wants to live, even now." Paul is afraid that his mother will not let him go. He tells Clara how he had admonished her: "—Mother, if I had to die, I'd die. I'd *will* to die" (432). When Paul implores her to starve herself, she refuses. In an act of (legal)³⁶ passive euthanasia, Paul withholds nourishment by putting water in her milk, but this only prolongs the suffering. For Paul, at the end of every road now lies only her sickroom (434), haunting him.

Voluntary euthanasia demands the expressed wish of the patient to end his or her life.³⁷ In Mrs Morel's case, however, only an insinuated complicity hints at such a possibility. It is not made explicit that she knowingly drinks the milk that will kill her

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in the end. Her death is thus better explained as “non-voluntary euthanasia,” in which the value of her existence is denied. In this context, the loss of her life does not tender a loss of something she might still value.³⁸ To justify the non-voluntary euthanasia, the novel charts the deathliness of Mrs Morel's life in terms of the mechanical, wasted existence she embodies in the novel. The brief spells of peace and happiness she experiences cannot alleviate the overall impression of a bleak existence forced on her by circumstance and personal failure: “But for herself, nothing but this dreary endurance—till the children grew up” and “looking ahead, the prospect of her life made her feel as if she were buried alive” (13, 14). Her sons “were derived from her, they were of her, and their works also would be hers” (127), but when William's recklessness in love seems to endanger her social aims for him, she feels that it is her life that is destroyed (162). After William's death “Mrs Morel's life now rooted itself in Paul” (171). Thus ends part I of the novel, and the conflict between life and death in Mrs Morel begins to rage in earnest.

On the one hand, the relationship between Paul and his mother is described as life-sustaining. Their companionship is positive: “They were both very happy so, and both unconscious of it. These times, that meant so much, and which were real living, they almost ignored” (190). Their ignorance aids the conscious erosion of each other's strength. Mrs Morel oscillates between hope and defeat. When Paul wins a prize for his pictures she exults. “Life for her was rich with promise. She was to see herself fulfilled” (222). After Paul's break-up with Miriam, she waits for him. “In him was established her life now” (261). In a little while, when Annie marries, “she felt she *must* live now, to be with her children. Life was so rich for her” (286). But when Paul rebels against her and returns to Miriam, she “began to give up at last. She had

finished. She was in the way" (324). Paul's emancipation with Clara causes her to acquiesce. "Now she began to feel tired again, as if she were done" (395). For Lawrence, this living by proxy does not constitute life.

Paul is also irritated by her self-denial and suffering (231) and admonishes her for being old and ill (282). Pity mingles with anger at the wasted life he feels his mother represents. Her marriage with Walter provided her, according to Paul, with "everything that was necessary for her living and developing" (362), but her life is now over and she worn out. Such arguments of "benefit" or "burden" of a life were another important aspect of the euthanasia debate at the beginning of the twentieth century. The perceived lack of utility of disabled and moribund people was fed by social Darwinist theories (Kemp 45), a situation exacerbated by World War I. The War also undermined the Christian opposition to euthanasia, which was based on the sanctity of life, and now seemed ridiculous in light of the slaughter of young, healthy men sanctioned by the Church.³⁹ In writings like "Reality of Peace" Lawrence stated how war is an embodiment of mankind's striving for death.⁴⁰ Having imbibed Spencer's social Darwinism at the same time when reading Haeckel, he wrote this biblical skit:

If I had my way, I would build a lethal chamber as big as the Crystal Palace, with a military band playing softly, and a Cinematograph working brightly; then I'd go out in the back streets and main streets and bring them in, all the sick, the halt and the maimed; I would lead them gently, and they would smile me a weary thanks; and the band would softly bubble out the 'Hallelujah Chorus' (*IL* 81).

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But, as Catherine Carswell pronounces, Lawrence was not only “a great discarder of the burden of living death” but a great believer in resurrection as well (Carswell 84). Accordingly, Paul's love for his mother takes a stand. Her wasted life should not end in a wasted death. She must die to end the horror, but she must die in an affirmative act. In compliance with Annie he gives her an overdose of morphine (438), and when this does not precipitate the death soon enough and her stertorous breath-sounds ring throughout the house, he contemplates suffocating her with a pile of heavy clothes (441). The horror of these contemplations is only made bearable by realizing that this death is not meant as destruction.

It is important to see the act as a sincere act of love,⁴¹ because in the apocalyptic final scene Paul refers to the continued existence of his mother: “Now she was gone abroad into the night, and he was with her still” (464). Immortality through love, Stewart points out, is a theme followed through *Sons and Lovers* into *The Rainbow*: “Death kills, yes, but it does not necessarily cancel, and after life there is still being by being loved” (538). Yet not every character is in need of the final consummation of life through death. “The Release” does not only concern Mrs Morel, it involves another person who is hovering on the brink of death and is released in this chapter. Baxter Dawes is laid up in hospital with typhoid. On Paul's first visit he “was lying sulking, and would not move forward towards convalescence. He seemed to grudge every beat of his heart” (424). When Paul gives up Clara to him, Dawes slowly re-enters life. Paul's pivotal role in this chapter is thus the giver of life and the giver of a “good death” preferable to a wasted life. But it is not surprising that this leaves him totally depleted.

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Opponents of euthanasia uphold that the dignity of human life is inherent in all stages of existence, and this capacity is not voided by illness, however severe (Finnis 31). Proponents of euthanasia argue that dignity is absent in some stages of existence, a viewpoint with which Lawrence seems to concur. In his vitalist metaphysic "the supreme triumph is to be most vividly, most perfectly alive" (*A* 149), but in *Sons and Lovers* Mrs Morel's vitality was crucially depleted and therefore it was necessary for Paul to extricate his mother from the "cancerous" (*5L* 471) relationship she had with life. At the same time he has to struggle to resist "the immense dark silence" which threatens to extinguish him as well (464). Paul is caught in an apocalyptic moment in which his link to the universe seems utterly lost, but he recovers and instead keeps up the connection with the "living, incarnate cosmos" (*A* 149).

Notes:

1. One reason might be that Lawrence himself outlined to Garnett in 1912 that the mother simply "begins to die," (*IL* 477), a misleading statement, as Kinkead-Weekes points out in *TE* 48. If critics refer to the incident, it is often only in paraphrase. *Sons and Lovers* as a "story of matricide" (Maddox 150) became an issue only in explorations of motivation and ideology in the novel (see below).
2. Accounts by Lawrence's friends and family of Lydia's demise on 9 December 1910 include May Chambers' atmospheric sketch of Lawrence at his mother's deathbed (*NCB* 3:618 – 20) and George H. Neville's disclosure how "the "Little Woman" laid down the wearisome burden of her life, to the torture of the soul of Lawrence" (Neville, "Recollections" 40), a torment which made W. E. Hopkin fear Lawrence "would commit suicide" (*NCB* 1: 72). Rachel Annand Taylor

surmises that the bond between Lawrence and his mother was “morbid” (*NCB* 1:137), and Jessie Chambers attests how Lawrence confided in her that he loved his mother “like a lover” (Chambers 184), a statement supported by his sister Emily: “Our Bert can never love any woman. He could only love his mother” (Chambers 216). Neville later wrote how he felt that the relationship between Lawrence and his mother was perfectly wholesome and natural (Neville, *Memoirs* 65 – 6).

3. See e.g. (*IL* 187): “You see, my mother has only a fortnight longer, the doctor says, and it is true, we have been great lovers.” Furthermore (*IL* 190): “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.” Also (*IL* 195): “She is my first, great love.” After her death, Lawrence wrote “and there is gone my love of loves.” (*IL* 199). It should be emphasized that no mention is made of this kind of love for his mother in previous and subsequent letters. It is particularly noteworthy that Lawrence's flirtatious letters to Blanche Jennings, even though they contain much love gossip, hardly mention Lydia Lawrence at all. This indicates that Lawrence's gushing rhetoric to Ms Taylor, Louie and Jessie was an understandable eruption at a time of heightened emotion.
4. See (*IL* 189): “I wish she could die tonight.” Furthermore (*IL* 192): “The desire of my life, at present, is to have mother buried and to be myself back at Davidson.” Aldington proclaims that Lawrence wrote the poems “Suspense” and “Endless Anxiety” as an endorsement of euthanasia (86).
5. Meyers 64, *EY* 272 – 3, reiterated in *TE* 101 and Maddox 65. Aldington, however, emphasizes that it was just a symbolic act (86). Burgess likewise stresses: “The

murder, or euthanasia, has no origin in the reality of Lawrence's mother's death [...]” (64).

6. Following blindly from Lawrence's statement about “shedding his sickness” in this novel (2L 90). His biographers, *pace* Murry who introduced the four stages as markers of Lawrence's development, continue to emphasize the compartmentalized nature of Lawrence's life history.
7. Murry: “The physical death of his mother could not make him whole again” (47). He remained emotionally and sexually crippled.
8. Schneider thinks that Lawrence deliberately exaggerated his dependence on his mother as a pretext for his break with Jessie (29).
9. For instance, Aldington describes Lydia Lawrence's death in terms of *Sons and Lovers* (84).
10. In 1979, Worthen called *Sons and Lovers* “a book written out of a situation and a dilemma which seeks a form transforming that situation and dilemma into a novel” (*Idea* 26). In Salgãdo's 1988 collection, he elaborated on this statement. *Sons and Lovers*, he insisted, is not simply autobiography, but an attempt to “create an attitude” (“Autobiographies” 3) to the problem he is describing. Similarly, Lawrence's late autobiographical essays are primarily concerned with the creating of myth (“Autobiographies” 7). “Autobiographical fiction, like all fiction, clearly exists as something *made*; it does not deal with truths, or facts, or conclusions, but is itself a construct” (13). As editor of the first volume of the Cambridge Biography, Worthen revisits this aspect of autobiographical writing and warns of the “danger of assuming that, what the character experiences, the author has also precisely experienced” (*EY* 452).

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11. "It's the tragedy of thousands of young men in England" (*IL* 477) preceded by "I don't think the real tragedy is in dying [...] the real tragedy is in the inner war which is waged between people who love each other" (*IL* 419).
12. Daleski co-mingles West's "repudiation" and Hough's "self-liberation" (57).
13. Farr terms it the "pivotal theme of bondage" (10).
14. Burgess 54. Schorer was one of the first critics who identified this as the confusion between "intention and performance" and the "psychological tension which disrupts the form of the novel and obscures its meaning" (98). Farr refutes Schorer and points out positive aspect of this antithesis (8 – 9). Schwarz feels that this tension adds to the aesthetic enjoyment of the novel (79 – 82, 101).
15. Millett treats *Sons and Lovers* autobiographically: "Paul Morel is of course Lawrence himself" (246).
16. Gilbert 151. Pullin: "Paul has ruthlessly despatched his mother because her continued existence, and his inability to resolve the situation, had become unbearable to him" (70).
17. Spilka reiterates the emphasis on the pre-Oedipal phase as a counter-Freudian argument, but he does not support the feminist emphasis on Lawrence's perceived antagonism to women (49 – 69).
18. In his earlier review of the novel, Kuttner evokes the "paralyzing sense of death" which pervades the novel (Untitled 78).
19. Matricide is not indexed in Freud's *Collected Works*. Friedman finds that Lawrence's psychology is based on a parallel concept to Freud's, but it is not derived from him ("Other" 437). Fernihough goes as far as saying that Lawrence's account "differed radically from Freud's" (66).

20. The fictionalized “substitution of funeral for marital rites” originated, according to Friedman, in *OTHELLO (Fictional 71 – 2)*. The link between Eros and Thanatos is also established by Weiss: “Gertrude’s death is at once a real death and a sexual death” (97).
21. Leavis instigated a critical stance which declares that *Sons and Lovers* shows “a sincerity in the record of emotional life” (315).
22. Caudwell was the first to record the tension between “changing social relations and outmoded consciousness” in *Sons and Lovers* (356). O’Connor also found an element of tragedy in the changing political and social circumstances which lead to sons being shaped by mothers (102).
23. Friedman emphasizes the aspect of sacrificial death. “Death may disrupt, but it is ultimately subsumed within an intelligible and overarching pattern—terminal for those who experience it, cathartic for those who bear witness—as the community reforms itself to seal the gap opened by death” (*Fictional 46*).
24. In “Women are So Cocksure” Lawrence describes how his mother, like many women of her generation, spoils her life by insisting on a grand goal in life, which leaves her spiritually bankrupt (*P 167 – 9*). Similarly in “Nobody Loves Me” he describes how women always need a purpose in life (*P 209*).
25. In *Last Poems*, especially in poems like “Murder” and “Strife,” morality and the concept of evil is severely challenged by Lawrence.
26. Several critics have commented on Lawrence’s perception of life and death. French groups Lawrence with Rilke and Whitman as “our supreme writers on death” (111). Potter acknowledges that Lawrence “tries to show the real direction of lives inside the outward course of events. [...] Perhaps this is the reason why he

writes with apparent truth when he describes death" (351). Goodheart argues that for Lawrence "[d]eath is the aim of a perfected life [...] the moment that precedes the new life that is coming into being" (74 – 5).

27. Lawrence's musings on life and death are evident in his letters and essays. In 1914 he claimed "[...] living is not simply not-dying. It is the only real thing, it is the aim and the end of all life" (*STH* 38). In "Return to Bestwood" (1926), Lawrence states: "It is life we want [...] Hopeless life should be put to sleep [...]" (*2P* 265) and "To be perfectly alive is to be immortal" (*2P* 266).
28. Nearing death himself, Lawrence was shocked by the suicide of Harry Crosby in 1929 (*DG* 523). Friedman calls Lawrence anti-Socratic, because Socrates stands for a veneration of death to the denigration of life (*Fictional* 52). I would argue, however, that Lawrence's metaphysic includes "good death" not to the detriment of life but as an enhancement and continuation of it.
29. See "Sorrow" for a poetic treatment of this theme.
30. Schneider points out the Lawrence's metaphysic was a religious rather than a materialist notion (49).
31. "The moral significance of euthanasia is inevitably connected with the way that we understand the value of life and what it is to uphold and protect that value" (Harris 6).
32. Quotes C. E. Goddard, 1901. This argument was revived in attempt at legalisation in 1936 (Kemp 89, 93 – 95). Worthen reiterates that Lawrence was exposed to the often painful deaths of many of his friends and family ("Lawrence" 9 – 10).
33. The use of morphine provoked new inquiries into euthanasia. Doctors introduced the term "intent" into the debate. A doctor who anticipates death on account of the

pain medicine given intends to ease pain. Another doctor who administers morphine to end the patient's life intends to kill (Frey, "Distinctions" 22 and Finnis 26).

34. See e.g. Frey, "Fear" 43 – 63.
35. The term is Durkheim's (Friedman, *Fictional* 55). "Blessed are the Powerful" reiterates Lawrence's opinion of "hangers-on": "Many people hang on, and hang on, into a corrupt old age, just because they have *not* lived, and therefore cannot let go. [...] But the life will not come *unless* we live" (2P 437).
36. Jennett points out that this makes it no less an ethical dilemma (170).
37. Harris argues that the aspect of the patients' autonomy and their right to self-determination is an important argument in the discussion on euthanasia. In this context voluntary euthanasia is depicted as a rational, courageous and altruistic decision (9 – 10). Kemp quotes Millard who refers to Hume's argument in his 1777 pamphlet *On Suicide*, emphasising the need for the individual to choose his [*sic*] own manner of death (103).
38. Proponents for a change in the law emphasize the absence of the ability of certain persons to value their own existence, e.g. coma-patients. As such persons no longer have the capacity to value their life, death does not deprive them of it. In this context the elementary human right to a dignified death overthrows the sanctity of life (Harris 9 – 10).
39. Kemp quotes Dean Inge, *Christian Ethics and Modern Problems*, London 1930 (76 – 7).
40. "But in Lawrence the idea of destruction was always healthily joined to creation" (Schneider 91).

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41. Ben-Ephraim writes: "It is an authentic case of killing with love" (137).

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