

Revisiting Authority and Individual Agency: Unpacking the Interplay of Power and Obedience in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* through Milgram's Theory

Soghra Nodeh^{1,*} , Kiana Tavakolizadeh²

¹ Corresponding author; Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature, Golestan University, Iran; s.nodeh@gu.ac.ir.

² Ph.D. Candidate, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Golestan University, Gorgan, Iran; tavakolizadehkiana@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of obedience in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) through the theoretical lens of Stanley Milgram's research on authority and compliance. The central problem addressed is the tension between individual autonomy and subordination to authoritative figures, exemplified by Paul Morel's psychological and emotional submission to his mother, Mrs. Morel. Obedience, defined as compliance with commands even when conflicting with personal morality, is explored both as a social-psychological phenomenon and a literary motif. The study integrates Milgram's findings on the behavioral, moral, and affective dimensions of obedience—such as perceived legitimacy of authority, emotional dependence, displacement of responsibility, conformity, and psychological entrapment—with Lawrence's literary depiction of familial authority. Methodologically, a comparative interpretive approach is employed, juxtaposing close readings of key passages from *Sons and Lovers* with Milgram's experimental results. This approach elucidates the mechanisms through which authority shapes behavior and emotion in both controlled laboratory settings and complex domestic relationships. Findings reveal that Paul's obedience to Mrs. Morel mirrors Milgramian dynamics: he externalizes responsibility, suppresses moral judgment, and prioritizes relational duty over personal desire, resulting in emotional isolation and constrained romantic engagement. The study demonstrates that obedience operates not merely as behavioral compliance but as a multidimensional process intertwined with affective, ethical, and relational factors. In conclusion, the integration of Milgram's theory and Lawrence's narrative underscores the interdisciplinary value of combining psychological insight with literary analysis, offering a nuanced understanding of authority, moral conflict, and emotional dependency in human behavior and literature.

Keywords: D. H. Lawrence, Milgram, Obedience, Sons and Lovers

Introduction

Obedience is often imagined as a social virtue—an ethical glue that sustains order, cohesion, and institutional stability. Yet modern social psychology has persistently demonstrated that obedience, when structured through legitimized authority, can become a mechanism of domination rather than harmony. From bureaucratic institutions to intimate family structures, authority frequently operates not through overt coercion but through psychological internalization, emotional dependency, and moral normalization. The question is therefore no longer whether individuals obey, but how authority produces obedience, and at what psychological and ethical cost.

This study approaches D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* through the theoretical lens of Stanley Milgram's theory of obedience to authority, reconceptualizing familial power not as care-based hierarchy but as a micro-authoritarian system. Milgram's experimental model demonstrates how individuals submit to authority figures even when such obedience conflicts with personal morality, suggesting that legitimacy of authority, rather than moral reasoning, often governs human conduct (Gibson 15-17). Transposed into the literary domain, this model allows the family to be read not merely as an emotional unit but as a disciplinary structure in which power is naturalized, obedience is moralized, and resistance is pathologized.

Departing from dominant psychoanalytic readings that frame maternal authority primarily in terms of Freudian attachment, possessive love, or Oedipal desire, this article theorizes maternal power in *Sons and Lovers* as a system of authority production rather than a structure of emotional pathology. Mrs. Morel is not examined simply as a psychologically overbearing mother, but as an authority figure whose moral legitimacy enables obedience, compliance, and psychological subjugation. Through this framework, obedience becomes a learned behavioral structure rather than an emotional reaction, and domination appears as normalized care rather than visible violence.

The study examines how authority is constructed, legitimized, and internalized within the family in *Sons and Lovers*, investigating how maternal power produces obedience as a psychological condition rather than a conscious choice. It analyzes the narrative legitimization of maternal authority, the role of emotional dependency and moral obligation in fostering compliance, the normalization of subjugation through care-based discourse, and the ways familial authority reflects broader societal power structures. By applying Milgram's obedience paradigm to literary analysis, the research conceptualizes the family as a microcosm of authoritarian systems, suggesting that the mechanisms of domination are first rehearsed within domestic spaces before extending to social institutions. The study's significance lies in its

interdisciplinary approach: while Lawrence's novel has been examined through psychoanalytic, feminist, and sociological frameworks, it has not been systematically analyzed through social-psychological theories of obedience. Integrating Milgram's model with literary interpretation offers a novel theoretical synthesis that advances both Lawrence scholarship and obedience studies, reframing the mother-child relationship as a site of micro-political authority and illustrating how obedience functions as a disciplinary mechanism even within intimate domestic contexts.

Literature Review

Critical scholarship on *Sons and Lovers* has predominantly been shaped by psychoanalytic and biographical paradigms. Early studies foreground Lawrence's psychological conflicts, interpreting the novel through Freudian frameworks that emphasize maternal fixation, psychic dualism, and unresolved familial trauma (Reeves, 1980). These readings conceptualize maternal influence primarily as emotional pathology rooted in unconscious desire structures.

Subsequent criticism has expanded this perspective by linking maternal domination to broader ideological and political dimensions. Ruderman (1985) situates maternal authority within Lawrence's evolving political imagination, arguing that domestic domination functions as a microcosmic model of social power. This shift

reframes family dynamics as structurally political rather than merely psychological.

Later studies focus more directly on Mrs. Morel as a central agent of narrative control and emotional governance. Kaur (2013) and Bhat (2017) emphasize her possessive authority and psychological dominance, interpreting her role through frameworks of maternal narcissism, Oedipal displacement, and emotional manipulation. These readings, however, remain largely grounded in psychoanalytic explanation rather than authority theory.

More recent scholarship has "diversified interpretive models" through Lacanian psychoanalysis (Akgun 3) and critiques of "autobiographical reductionism" (Han 6), emphasizing symbolic structures, narcissistic dynamics, and socio-historical contexts. While these studies deepen the understanding of maternal power, they continue to conceptualize domination primarily as psychological pathology rather than as systemic authority production.

Notably absent from existing scholarship is the application of obedience theory from social psychology—particularly Milgram's authority paradigm—to Lawrence's domestic power structures. No sustained study has examined *Sons and Lovers* through the framework of obedience/disobedience, authority legitimacy, and moral submission. This theoretical gap limits current interpretations to affective, symbolic, or pathological models of domination.

By introducing Milgram's obedience theory into Lawrence studies, this article shifts the critical focus from maternal psychology to authority mechanics, from emotional possession to structural obedience, and from family pathology to micro-authoritarian systems. This interdisciplinary approach not only fills a significant theoretical gap but also repositions *Sons and Lovers* as a text that anticipates modern theories of power, discipline, and submission.

This study therefore positions *Sons and Lovers* not merely as a psychological novel of family relations, but as a literary anatomy of authority itself—revealing how obedience is socially produced, morally legitimized, and psychologically internalized within the most intimate structures of human life.

Theoretical Framework

The phenomenon of obedience occupies a pivotal position within both social psychology and literary studies, offering a lens through which to interrogate the dynamics of power, authority, and human agency. Obedience, in its most general sense, is the compliance of an individual with the directives of an authority figure, often accompanied by an internalized suspension of personal moral judgment (Milgram 10). In social contexts, obedience is not merely a matter of individual predisposition; it is mediated by structural hierarchies, normative expectations, and situational contingencies that collectively shape

behavioral outcomes. From a psychological standpoint, obedience reflects the intricate interplay between authority, moral responsibility, and affective engagement, revealing how individuals navigate the tension between personal ethics and external demands (Karimi 144).

Stanley Milgram's pioneering research on obedience elucidates the mechanisms through which ordinary individuals submit to authority even in morally fraught contexts. Milgram's framework provides a rigorous conceptual apparatus for understanding obedience as a socially and psychologically mediated phenomenon. Central to his theory is the assertion that authority can override individual ethical frameworks when the subject perceives the authority as legitimate and the consequences of action as morally externalized. In other words, obedience is not a mere reflexive response to coercion but a complex cognitive-affective process in which the subordinate negotiates moral responsibility, emotional pressure, and perceived legitimacy (Milgram 33–34). Factors such as the proximity of the authority figure, the visibility of the victim, the presence of institutional structures, and normative expectations profoundly influence the degree of compliance. These variables establish a framework in which obedience becomes psychologically compelling and morally palatable, even when it entails harm to others.

In literary studies, the mechanisms of obedience extend beyond empirical observation to

the realm of narrative and character psychology, providing a lens for analyzing power relations within fictional worlds. D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) presents a paradigmatic case for exploring the dynamics of authority, subordination, and psychological entrapment within the domestic sphere. The novel depicts the complex relationship between Mrs. Morel and her sons, particularly Paul Morel, wherein maternal authority assumes both emotional and moral dimensions. Mrs. Morel's influence is not merely prescriptive but constitutive: it shapes Paul's affective orientation, moral reasoning, and capacity for autonomous action. Through the lens of Milgram's theory, Paul's deference to his mother exemplifies the psychological dynamics of obedience, wherein emotional attachment, perceived legitimacy, and internalized moral obligation converge to produce compliance that often conflicts with personal desire or ethical evaluation.

The convergence of Milgram's experimental insights with Lawrence's literary depiction allows for a nuanced theoretical synthesis. Both contexts demonstrate that obedience is sustained by a triad of psychological mechanisms: first, the perceived legitimacy of authority, wherein the subordinate interprets the authority figure as morally or socially justified; second, emotional dependence, wherein the subordinate's affective attachments amplify the imperative to comply; and third, displacement of responsibility, wherein the

subordinate attributes the consequences of their actions to the authority figure, thereby mitigating personal moral culpability (Milgram 25–26). In *Sons and Lovers*, these mechanisms manifest as Paul's internalized moral duty to his mother, which constrains his romantic and social agency. Milgram's findings illuminate how such patterns of compliance operate even in intimate, domestic settings, illustrating the psychological plausibility of literary representations of subordinated agency.

Moreover, the novel extends the conceptual horizon of obedience by foregrounding emotional and moral subtleties. Paul negotiates implicit moral imperatives embedded in familial and societal expectations. His obedience is both relational and ethical: relational, because it is structured by emotional bonds and attachment to his mother; ethical, because it implicates his understanding of duty, loyalty, and moral propriety. This demonstrates that obedience is not solely a behavioral outcome but a complex interplay of affective, cognitive, and ethical dimensions.

Therefore, by situating Paul Morel's behavior within the broader theoretical apparatus of obedience, this study interrogates the psychological realism of literary characterization and highlights the resonance of social-psychological insights within narrative forms. The application of this theory to Lawrence's novel not only enriches the interpretive reading of *Sons and Lovers* but also demonstrates the broader

applicability of obedience theory to the analysis of literary texts, where authority, agency, and moral conflict intersect in complex and nuanced ways.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study conceptualizes obedience as a multidimensional phenomenon, constituted by authority, legitimacy, emotional dependence, and moral responsibility. Milgram's experiments provide a model for understanding the structural and psychological determinants of compliance, while Lawrence's novel exemplifies the lived and emotional consequences of obedience within familial and social contexts. The ensuing analysis leverages this framework to explore the manifestations of obedience in *Sons and Lovers*, elucidating the mechanisms through which authority exerts influence, compliance is negotiated, and subordinate agency is both constrained and morally complicated.

Discussion

In social systems structured by hierarchical authority, obedience functions not merely as a social virtue but as a foundational mechanism through which order, conformity, and behavioral regulation are sustained. As Milgram (1974) argues, obedience is not an incidental aspect of social life but a structural necessity within organized communities: individuals rarely exist outside networks of power, and social interaction itself presupposes relations of command, compliance, and authority. Within such systems,

obedience becomes a behavioral determinant rather than a moral choice, shaping individual conduct through internalized norms rather than external coercion.

Social psychology has long interrogated the paradox of human obedience: how rational, morally reflective individuals submit to commands that contradict their ethical judgments (Karimi 154). Historical catastrophes—most notably the bureaucratic mass violence of the twentieth century—demonstrate that large-scale atrocities require not merely authoritarian leadership but mass compliance. As Milgram famously observes, destructive systems become operational not through individual cruelty alone but through collective submission to legitimized authority. Obedience, therefore, emerges not as personal moral failure but as a socially produced condition sustained by institutional structures, legitimacy narratives, and psychological displacement of responsibility.

According to Milgram, obedience operates through legitimacy, dependency, emotional investment, and moral displacement rather than overt coercion. Authority is not enforced through violence but internalized through trust, loyalty, and perceived moral obligation. (44) This is what happens to Paul in Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* which allows for the application of Milgram's theoretical model to Lawrence's representation of familial power.

Obedience, Emotional Authority, and Psychological Subjugation in *Sons and Lovers*

Within *Sons and Lovers*, the mother–son relationship—particularly between Mrs. Morel and Paul—constitutes a structurally asymmetric authority relation that closely parallels the obedience dynamics theorized by Stanley Milgram. Mrs. Morel does not merely function as a parental presence; she operates as a legitimized moral authority whose emotional power governs Paul’s psychological development, ethical reasoning, and relational autonomy. Lawrence thus constructs a domestic microcosm of authority in which obedience is not enforced through coercion, but internalized through affective dependency, moral obligation, and emotional surveillance. This configuration mirrors Milgram’s central insight: that obedience is most effective when authority is perceived as legitimate, benevolent, and morally justified.

The novel stages a sustained tension between autonomy and subjugation, a dialectic that is central to both Lawrence’s psychological realism and Milgram’s theory of obedience. In Milgram’s experiments, compliance is not primarily produced by physical force but by the subject’s internalization of authority as morally superior and epistemically trustworthy. Similarly, Mrs. Morel’s authority derives not from explicit domination but from her symbolic positioning as moral guide, emotional center, and ethical reference point within the family structure. Her

maternal authority becomes structurally homologous to institutional authority in Milgram’s model: both operate through legitimacy, dependency, and moral displacement rather than overt coercion.

Lawrence explicitly figures Mrs. Morel as an omnipresent psychological force whose love becomes indistinguishable from control: “She had him, and he had no idea of how to escape. She held him, and was all the time on the verge of smothering him with her love” (Lawrence 98). This formulation captures the paradox of affective authority: intimacy becomes a mechanism of domination, and care becomes a technology of control. Paul’s dependence is not imposed externally but produced internally, creating a form of obedience that is self-regulating. This mirrors Milgram’s finding that obedience functions most efficiently when individuals no longer experience authority as external pressure but as internal obligation.

Following Walter Morel’s emotional and symbolic absence, Mrs. Morel assumes total moral and psychological governance of the family. Her authority becomes absolute not merely because of structural position, but because she successfully colonizes Paul’s emotional world. She does not simply guide his development; she defines it. Her self-conception as moral architect is explicit: “She felt as if it were her mission to make him a man” (Lawrence 102). This language of “mission” is crucial. It constructs maternal authority as moral

vocation, thereby legitimizing control as ethical duty. In Milgram's experiments, the experimenter similarly reframes harm as service to a higher purpose—scientific progress—thus neutralizing the subject's moral resistance. Authority functions through moral redefinition: harm becomes duty, submission becomes virtue, and obedience becomes ethical compliance. Consequently, the subordinate subject relinquishes moral agency in favor of perceived moral legitimacy (Milgram 33).

These dynamics produce what may be termed the conflicted but compliant subject. Paul experiences acute internal conflict without translating that conflict into resistance. His obedience is affective rather than procedural, emotional rather than institutional, but structurally identical: he remains behaviorally submissive despite psychological distress. His relationships with Miriam and Clara become sites of emotional paralysis because they threaten the maternal authority structure that organizes his identity. Mrs. Morel's disapproval functions as a silent command, generating obedience without explicit instruction.

Paul's divided consciousness—torn between desire and duty—produces a form of moral paralysis: "Paul's struggle between love and guilt is ongoing. He cannot truly love Miriam or Clara because his mother has claimed the center of his emotional world. He could not love her. He could not leave his mother" (Lawrence 179). This is not simply emotional indecision; it is psychological

subjugation. Paul's inability to love is structurally produced by his obedience to maternal authority. His subjectivity is organized around loyalty rather than autonomy, obligation rather than desire. This reproduces Milgram's central finding: obedience persists not because subjects lack moral awareness, but because authority restructures moral perception itself.

A crucial parallel lies in displaced accountability. Based on Milgram, subjects externalize responsibility by locating agency in the authority figure ("I was just following orders") (Milgram 25). Paul performs the same displacement: "I can't love you like I should [...] I belong to her" (Lawrence 295).

The language of possession signals a collapse of agency. Belonging replaces choosing; obligation replaces autonomy. Responsibility is transferred from self to authority, making harm psychologically tolerable. Paul's emotional injuries to Miriam and Clara are thus not experienced as ethical failures, but as tragic necessities produced by an externalized moral structure. Obedience becomes a psychological alibi.

This culminates in unquestioned obedience, where authority is no longer perceived as negotiable but absolute: "He knew he was ill with her, and that he must go away, but still he submitted" (Lawrence 323). Here, knowledge does not produce resistance. Awareness does not generate autonomy. Submission persists despite

insight, demonstrating the depth of internalized authority. This precisely reflects Milgram's findings, which show cognitive recognition of harm does not disrupt obedience when authority is perceived as legitimate (Milgram 121).

The ultimate consequence is psychological isolation. Blind obedience produces emotional estrangement rather than moral stability (Milgram 205). Paul's final solitude is not merely romantic failure but existential displacement: "Now he was left alone. Nothing remained" (Lawrence 346). This isolation is the structural outcome of obedience-based identity formation. When subjectivity is organized around submission rather than selfhood, relational life collapses once the authority bond destabilizes. Obedience thus produces not order, but fragmentation (Milgram 206).

Finally, such a system generates psychological entrapment. Disobedience becomes unthinkable not because of external punishment, but because it is symbolically constructed as betrayal—of science in Milgram, of maternal love in Lawrence. Paul's entrapment is affective rather than institutional, but equally coercive. His love becomes the very mechanism of his captivity. Obedience is sustained not by fear, but by loyalty, guilt, and emotional dependency.

In this sense, *Sons and Lovers* does not merely illustrate obedience; it theorizes it. Lawrence anticipates Milgram's psychological model by dramatizing authority as an internalized

structure rather than an external force. Mrs. Morel functions not simply as a controlling mother, but as a symbolic authority system that reorganizes moral perception, emotional agency, and ethical responsibility. Paul becomes not merely a victim of maternal dominance, but a subject produced by obedience itself—psychologically formed through submission, loyalty, and displaced agency.

Thus, the novel operates as a literary analogue to Milgram's theory: both reveal that obedience is not the suspension of morality, but its reconfiguration under authority. In both frameworks, obedience emerges as a psychologically rational response within a morally distorted system—making submission not an aberration, but a structurally produced norm.

Structural Factors Reinforcing Obedience

Milgram's theory identifies obedience not as an isolated psychological reaction, but as a structurally produced behavior shaped by a constellation of reinforcing conditions. Obedience emerges through interacting variables that regulate perception, responsibility, proximity, legitimacy, and moral framing (Milgram 70). When applied to *Sons and Lovers*, these variables illuminate the mechanisms through which maternal authority becomes internalized as moral necessity rather than external domination.

The most salient reinforcing factors operative in both frameworks include the presence or absence of authority, the perceptual visibility of

the victim, the displacement of responsibility, the legitimacy of authority, proximity to authority, and the cognitive avoidance of consequences (Milgram 71). These variables do not function as isolated psychological elements; rather, they interact dynamically to construct an integrated system of obedience that regulates behavior through emotional conditioning, moral realignment, and the gradual internalization of authority. Milgram's experiments demonstrate that obedience becomes most effective when subjects perceive authority as legitimate, experience diminished personal accountability, and remain psychologically distanced from the consequences of their actions. Under such conditions, ethical autonomy weakens as individuals increasingly subordinate personal judgment to externally sanctioned structures of command. What makes Milgram's model particularly significant for literary analysis is that these mechanisms are not confined to institutional or experimental environments. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* reproduces many of the same psychological dynamics within the intimate sphere of domestic life, where authority derives its force not from formal institutional power but from emotional dependency, familial obligation, and affective legitimacy. The family consequently functions as a subtle but powerful obedience structure in which emotional attachment naturalizes submission and transforms compliance into an expression of love, loyalty, and moral duty.

Mrs. Morel's authority over Paul operates precisely through this mechanism: her emotional centrality enables her influence to appear nurturing rather than controlling, ethical rather than possessive. Lawrence's narrative structure further reinforces this obedience system by repeatedly positioning Paul within situations where independent desire conflicts with internalized obligation. His relationships with Miriam and Clara become psychologically unsustainable because emotional autonomy threatens the authority structure governing his identity. Like Milgram's subjects, Paul experiences responsibility as displaced toward a legitimized authority figure whose emotional claims override his own ethical and personal impulses. The novel, therefore, reveals how obedience is produced not only through direct command, but through subtle forms of emotional organization that reshape perception, regulate guilt, and condition the boundaries of individual agency. In this sense, Lawrence transforms the domestic sphere into a psychological laboratory in which the mechanisms of authority and submission become embedded within the structure of intimacy itself.

Presence and Absence of Authority

The perceptual presence of the victim functions as a critical moderator of moral resistance. Milgram demonstrates that when victims are visible, audible, or proximate, obedience decreases due to heightened empathic conflict. When victims are

distanced, abstracted, or silenced, obedience intensifies (Milgram 33).

In *Sons and Lovers*, Miriam and Clara occupy the structural position of the victim-subjects of obedience. Their emotional suffering becomes ethically visible through proximity and intimacy. Miriam's pain—"She suffered as if he had wounded her physically" (Lawrence 197)—translates emotional harm into corporeal metaphor, forcing ethical recognition. Her presence generates moral pressure that destabilizes Paul's obedience to maternal authority.

However, unlike what Milgram's study shows, Paul does not convert this recognition into resistance. Instead, he experiences moral dissonance without ethical rupture. The victim's presence produces awareness but not transformation. This reveals a crucial structural insight: perceptual presence alone is insufficient to disrupt obedience when authority is emotionally internalized. Empathy emerges, but agency remains suspended. Lawrence thus dramatizes a more advanced stage of obedience psychology than Milgram's laboratory model: a subject capable of moral awareness without moral autonomy.

Displacement of Responsibility and Moral Neutralization

A central mechanism sustaining obedience is the displacement of responsibility. Milgram demonstrates that subjects maintain obedience by transferring agency to authority figures, thereby neutralizing guilt and ethical accountability. Harm becomes psychologically tolerable when responsibility is externalized (Milgram 25). Paul exhibits an identical cognitive structure: "I can't love her as I ought... You come before her." (Lawrence 244) Here, emotional failure is reframed as moral inevitability. Paul does not perceive himself as an agent of harm but as a subject constrained by superior authority. Responsibility is transferred from self to maternal influence, producing moral insulation.

This displacement of responsibility produces what may be termed a condition of ethical erasure in which the suffering of the victim is recognized at the level of perception but deprived of decisive moral significance (Helm & Morelli, 1979). Within such authority-centered structures, individuals do not necessarily become indifferent to pain; rather, their ethical priorities are reorganized in ways that subordinate empathy to obedience, loyalty, and psychological dependency. The victim remains visible, yet their suffering loses the power to interrupt the system of authority governing the subject's actions. Moral response becomes suspended not because compassion disappears entirely, but because responsibility has been psychologically redirected toward the preservation of an authoritative

relational order. Lawrence dramatizes this process through Paul Morel's relationship with Miriam. Paul repeatedly recognizes Miriam's emotional suffering and demonstrates moments of guilt, hesitation, and self-awareness. Nevertheless, this recognition never develops into sustained ethical accountability because his emotional and psychological orientation remains structured around maternal authority. Miriam's pain is therefore rendered secondary to the loyalty system through which Paul understands duty, affection, and identity itself. The tragedy of the relationship lies precisely in this contradiction: Paul is not emotionally incapable of perceiving harm, yet he lacks the autonomy necessary to prioritize another person's emotional reality over the authority structure that defines his sense of self. Lawrence thus reveals how obedience can generate emotional injury without conscious malice, allowing individuals to participate in destructive relationships while continuing to perceive themselves as morally justified. Milgram articulates an analogous psychological mechanism within the experimental context. Subjects administering electric shocks frequently displayed visible signs of tension, anxiety, and discomfort, indicating that ethical sensitivity had not disappeared. However, responsibility was systematically displaced onto the authority figure conducting the experiment, enabling participants to reinterpret harm as procedural necessity rather than personal moral choice. The experimental

framework neutralized ethical agency by transforming obedience into a perceived obligation and reframing violence as compliance with legitimate authority. In this process, moral judgment becomes externalized: the individual no longer experiences the self as the primary source of responsibility. Obedience therefore operates not primarily through cruelty or sadistic intention, but through moral restructuring. Responsibility is displaced, agency becomes diffused across systems of authority, and harm is reinterpreted as an unavoidable consequence of duty rather than an ethical failure requiring resistance (Milgram 26; Russell 29). Both Lawrence and Milgram demonstrate that the danger of obedience lies precisely in its ability to preserve the subject's sense of moral innocence while simultaneously enabling forms of emotional and psychological violence. Ethical sensitivity is not eradicated; instead, it is anesthetized, redirected, and subordinated to the imperatives of authority.

Legitimacy of Authority and Obedience

Perceived legitimacy constitutes one of the most decisive foundations of obedience. Milgram demonstrates that authority becomes effective not through coercion alone, but through its symbolic and institutional credibility. Subjects obey the authority because it is framed as rational, scientific, and morally justified, thereby transforming compliance into ethical obligation rather than mere submission. Authority derives its

power from perceived righteousness, not force (Milgram 26).

A structurally homologous mechanism operates in *Sons and Lovers*, where authority functions not through overt coercion or explicit domination, but through deeply internalized forms of normative legitimacy. Mrs. Morel's authority derives from her culturally privileged position as mother—a role traditionally associated with sacrifice, emotional labor, moral guidance, and unconditional devotion. Because maternal authority is socially coded as nurturing and ethically benevolent, its influence becomes difficult to question or resist. Her power therefore does not appear oppressive in conventional terms; rather, it acquires legitimacy through affection, suffering, and moral centrality within the family structure. Lawrence carefully constructs this legitimacy so that obedience emerges not as externally imposed submission, but as an emotionally naturalized and ethically sanctioned response. This mechanism closely parallels Milgram's argument that obedience becomes most effective when authority is perceived as legitimate and morally justified. In Milgram's experiments, subjects complied not primarily because of force, but because the scientific framework endowed the experimenter with institutional credibility and epistemic authority. Participants interpreted obedience as cooperation with a meaningful and socially validated system. Similarly, in Lawrence's novel, Mrs. Morel's influence over

Paul is reinforced by the moral prestige attached to motherhood itself. Her emotional needs and expectations acquire ethical weight precisely because they are interpreted through the discourse of maternal sacrifice and familial devotion. As a result, Paul experiences loyalty to his mother not as personal preference, but as an unquestionable moral imperative. This internalized legitimacy is explicitly articulated in Paul's affective reasoning: "He felt as if he were denying her something—something which she had earned from him, and which he ought to give her" (Lawrence 207). The language of the passage is particularly revealing because authority is represented not as domination but as entitlement grounded in sacrifice. Mrs. Morel's influence appears justified because it is perceived as deserved, emotionally earned through years of care, suffering, and devotion. Consequently, obedience becomes inseparable from gratitude and ethical obligation. Paul's emotional world is structured around the belief that autonomy would constitute a form of moral failure rather than legitimate self-assertion. Lawrence thereby demonstrates how legitimacy transforms authority into an internal psychological force that regulates identity, desire, and ethical judgment from within. Disobedience is no longer understood as independence or self-realization; instead, it is experienced as betrayal, ingratitude, and emotional abandonment. The authority structure thus perpetuates itself through guilt and affective obligation rather than direct coercion. In

this respect, both Lawrence and Milgram reveal that the most enduring forms of obedience emerge not from fear alone, but from systems of legitimacy that persuade individuals to perceive submission as morally necessary and ethically virtuous.

Milgram's findings show that moral hesitation is neutralized when subjects trust the legitimacy of authority; ethical doubt is suppressed through reassurance and institutional framing (Milgram 38). Similarly, Paul experiences emotional conflict but cannot translate it into resistance: "She was the strongest power in his life" (Lawrence 193). Authority functions as moral gravity—it organizes the subject's ethical universe. Paul yields not because he is commanded, but because obedience appears morally correct.

Thus, legitimacy transforms authority into conscience. Mrs. Morel does not impose obedience; she authorizes it morally. Lawrence's narrative anticipates Milgram's central insight: obedience becomes structurally stable when authority is perceived as ethically rightful rather than merely powerful.

Proximity to Authority

Proximity intensifies obedience. Milgram demonstrates that physical and psychological closeness to authority significantly increases compliance by amplifying emotional pressure and reducing psychological distance. Authority

becomes not only commanding but relationally binding (Milgram 37).

In *Sons and Lovers*, this mechanism is reproduced through emotional intimacy rather than institutional presence. Mrs. Morel's authority operates through continuous proximity—emotional, psychological, and relational. Her presence is not episodic but immersive, shaping Paul's inner world as much as his external behavior: "He was bound to her. She had him with her tremendous power—held him with his soul" (Lawrence 203). Authority here is not external control but affective occupation. Mrs. Morel becomes an internal presence within Paul's psychic structure. Her influence functions as an internalized authority voice rather than an external command source.

This proximity renders resistance psychologically destabilizing: "He could not bear to hurt her. He was tied to her like a slave, even when he wanted to get free" (Lawrence 207). The metaphor of bondage signals not coercion but emotional captivity. Disobedience requires emotional rupture, not moral choice. The cost of resistance is relational annihilation.

Similarly, Milgram states that subjects continue obedience not because they agree with the orders, but because defying a proximate authority figure generate unbearable emotional pressure. Obedience becomes the psychologically easier option (Milgram 37). This structure is further intensified by total relational integration:

“She directed him as though he were a part of her own body” (Lawrence 178). Here, authority becomes ontological rather than hierarchical. Paul’s autonomy dissolves into maternal identity. The subject becomes functionally inseparable from authority, making disobedience psychologically inconceivable. Thus, proximity transforms authority into identity structure. Obedience is no longer behavioral compliance but existential alignment.

Cognitive Avoidance of Consequences Punishment and Obedience Conditioning

Punishment operates as a conditioning mechanism that stabilizes obedience over time. In Milgram’s experiment, punishment is framed as procedural necessity—an instrumental tool of learning and discipline. Subjects comply not because they desire harm, but because punishment is normalized as legitimate practice within the authority system (Milgram 33).

In *Sons and Lovers*, punishment is not physical but affective and psychological. Mrs. Morel disciplines through guilt, withdrawal, emotional suffering, and moral reproach: “Her wounded love dragged at him like a chain” (Lawrence 214). Here, love itself becomes punitive. Emotional pain functions as a regulatory instrument.

Repeated exposure to this emotional punishment produces obedience conditioning (Milgram, 1974, p. 45): “He had learned to

submit—his will had gone under hers, and he had never really got it free again” (Lawrence 230). Submission becomes habitual rather than situational. Resistance is not eliminated through force but eroded through repetition.

Milgram similarly observes that once subjects initiate obedience, continuation becomes easier due to psychological normalization. Initial compliance restructures moral thresholds, making subsequent compliance less resistant (Milgram 45).

In such systems, punishment does not merely enforce obedience—it trains obedience. Over time, the subject learns that resistance produces suffering, while submission produces relational stability. Obedience becomes a survival strategy. Therefore, punishment functions not as coercion but as behavioral conditioning, transforming submission into psychological reflex.

Ignorance and Avoidance of Victim Consequences

Another way for stabilizing mechanism of obedience is selective moral blindness. Milgram demonstrates that subjects sustain obedience by minimizing, distancing, or rationalizing the victim’s suffering. Psychological distance enables ethical disengagement (Milgram 6).

This mechanism is structurally replicated in *Sons and Lovers*. Mrs. Morel maintains control through denial of harm, framing domination as

care: “She never realized she was gradually killing the love in him by her persistent clutch” (Lawrence, 1913, p. 216). Authority is maintained through moral misrecognition. Harm is reinterpreted as protection. Similarly, Paul sustains obedience through ethical deferral: “He had no right to go from her, to break from her. She was his responsibility” (Lawrence 228). Responsibility becomes inverted: loyalty replaces autonomy, and duty replaces ethics.

Milgram notes that subjects often treat victim suffering as abstract or fictional, enabling continued compliance (Milgram 35). Paul mirrors this structure: “He knew he was injuring Clara, as he had Miriam. But he couldn’t help it” (Lawrence, 1913, p. 258). Here, harm is acknowledged but morally neutralized. Responsibility is displaced onto circumstance and authority. This produces moral dissociation: awareness without accountability. Ethical recognition exists, but agency is suspended. Thus, obedience persists not through cruelty but through cognitive restructuring. Harm becomes normalized, responsibility diffused, and suffering ethically subordinated.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the dynamics of obedience within D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*, interrogating how authority, emotional dependence, and moral responsibility shape the subordinate actions of characters, particularly Paul

Morel. The central problem addressed was the tension between individual agency and the compelling influence of authoritative figures within intimate, domestic, and social contexts. By juxtaposing Lawrence’s literary depiction with the empirical insights of Stanley Milgram’s obedience experiments, this research aimed to elucidate the psychological and ethical mechanisms that govern compliance, highlighting the interplay between structural authority and affective attachment.

The findings indicate that obedience in *Sons and Lovers* is neither a superficial behavioral response nor a mere narrative device; rather, it is a deeply entrenched psychological phenomenon, mediated by perceived legitimacy, moral obligation, and emotional dependency. Paul’s repeated subordination to his mother’s authority exemplifies the intricate mechanisms identified by Milgram: the internalization of directives, the displacement of responsibility, and the prioritization of relational and moral imperatives over personal desire. Lawrence’s novel expands upon these mechanisms by foregrounding the subtleties of affective and ethical entanglement, demonstrating that obedience in literary contexts encompasses both the cognitive structures identified in social psychology and the complex moral and emotional dimensions inherent in human relationships.

In conclusion, the integration of Milgramian theory and Lawrencean literary analysis provides a robust framework for

understanding the nuanced manifestations of obedience. The study underscores that authority operates not solely through coercion or explicit directive but through a multifaceted interplay of legitimacy, emotional attachment, and ethical negotiation. The implications of these findings extend beyond literary analysis, suggesting that psychological theories of obedience can illuminate the moral and relational architectures of narrative worlds, while literature can, in turn, enrich psychological understanding by portraying the lived, affective, and ethical realities of compliance.

Ultimately, by situating Paul Morel's experiences within the broader conceptual scaffolding of social-psychological theory, the study offers a comprehensive account of how authority, moral responsibility, and affective bonds converge to shape human behavior. The convergence of these disciplinary perspectives not only deepens our understanding of Lawrence's novel but also exemplifies the productive interplay between literary and psychological inquiry, illustrating the enduring relevance of interdisciplinary approaches to questions of power, agency, and human conduct.

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