

Life Lines

A Shared Reading activity pack
to read wherever you are

Issue 37

“She looked at him, startled. This was a new tract of life suddenly opened before her.”

Sons and Lovers, D.H. Lawrence

The Reader is a charity which usually brings people together to listen to stories, extracts and poems in free, weekly Shared Reading groups. In these Life Lines activity packs we hope to offer everyone the same comfort, meaning and connection through great literature that our reading groups provide – wherever it finds you.

Each Life Lines pack will bring you some of a story and a poem, which you can read in your own time. Along with the reading, you'll find a selection of thoughts and feelings shared by other fellow readers about the chosen pieces. We suggest that reading the poem or the story out loud is a great way to fully immerse yourself in the reading experience and discover your own personal connections with the material. It may feel strange but it does make a difference, so do please give it a try!

This week's story is from Chapter 1 of Sons and Lovers by D.H. Lawrence. In this extract we take a look at the early married life of the Morels, the couple at the heart of the story. Things start off sunny but quite soon after their wedding the cracks begin to show, and we are left wondering whether this is a match which has been well made after all.

Feel free to make notes on your own thoughts and feelings as you go, perhaps marking words or sentences that particularly stand out to you...

Extract from Chapter 1 of *Sons and Lovers*, D.H. Lawrence

Mrs. Morel came of a good old burgher family, famous independents who had fought with Colonel Hutchinson, and who remained stout Congregationalists. Her grandfather had gone bankrupt in the lace-market at a time when so many lace-manufacturers were ruined in Nottingham. Her father, George Coppard, was an engineer—a large, handsome, haughty man, proud of his fair skin and blue eyes, but more proud still of his integrity. Gertrude resembled her mother in her small build. But her temper, proud and unyielding, she had from the Coppards.

George Coppard was bitterly galled by his own poverty. He became foreman of the engineers in the dockyard at Sheerness. Mrs. Morel—Gertrude—was the second daughter. She favoured her mother, loved her mother best of all; but she had the Coppards' clear, defiant blue eyes and their broad brow. She remembered to have hated her father's overbearing manner towards her gentle, humorous, kindly-souled mother. She remembered running over the breakwater at Sheerness and finding the boat. She remembered to have been petted and flattered by all the men when she had gone to the dockyard, for she was a delicate, rather proud child. She remembered the funny old mistress, whose assistant she had become, whom she had loved to help in the private school. And she still had the Bible that John Field had given her. She used to walk home from chapel with John Field when she was nineteen. He was the son of a well-to-do tradesman, had been to college in London, and was to devote himself to business.

She could always recall in detail a September Sunday afternoon, when they had sat under the vine at the back of her father's house. The sun came through the chinks of the vine-leaves and made beautiful patterns, like a lace scarf, falling on her and on him. Some of the leaves were clean yellow, like yellow flat flowers.

“Now sit still,” he had cried. “Now your hair, I don't know what it *is* like! It's as bright as copper and gold, as red as burnt copper, and it has gold threads where the sun shines on it. Fancy their saying it's brown. Your mother calls it mouse-colour.”

She had met his brilliant eyes, but her clear face scarcely showed the elation which rose within her.

“But you say you don't like business,” she pursued.

“I don't. I hate it!” he cried hotly.

“And you would like to go into the ministry,” she half implored.

“I should. I should love it, if I thought I could make a first-rate preacher.”

“Then why don’t you—why *don’t* you?” Her voice rang with defiance.

“If *I* were a man, nothing would stop me.”

She held her head erect. He was rather timid before her.

“But my father’s so stiff-necked. He means to put me into the business, and I know he’ll do it.”

“But if you’re a *man*?” she had cried.

“Being a man isn’t everything,” he replied, frowning with puzzled helplessness.

Now, as she moved about her work at the Bottoms, with some experience of what being a man meant, she knew that it was *not* everything.

At twenty, owing to her health, she had left Sheerness. Her father had retired home to Nottingham. John Field’s father had been ruined; the son had gone as a teacher in Norwood. She did not hear of him until, two years later, she made determined inquiry. He had married his landlady, a woman of forty, a widow with property.

And still Mrs. Morel preserved John Field’s Bible. She did not now believe him to be—— Well, she understood pretty well what he might or might not have been. So she preserved his Bible, and kept his memory intact in her heart, for her own sake. To her dying day, for thirty-five years, she did not speak of him.

A Pause for Thought...

What do we make of Gertrude so far? What she says about John Field’s prospects is quite interesting: ‘Her voice rang with defiance. “If I were a man, nothing would stop me.”’ What do we think about that?

Not too far afterwards, we get an idea of her outlook having changed: ‘Now, as she moved about her work at the Bottoms, with some experience of what being a man meant, she knew that it was not everything.’

We also see that she holds onto thoughts of John Field: she 'kept his memory intact in her heart, for her own sake.' What would that feel like, remembering someone in your heart, and for your own sake?

Let's pick up and see how life goes on for Gertrude.

When she was twenty-three years old, she met, at a Christmas party, a young man from the Erewash Valley. Morel was then twenty-seven years old. He was well set-up, erect, and very smart. He had wavy black hair that shone again, and a vigorous black beard that had never been shaved. His cheeks were ruddy, and his red, moist mouth was noticeable because he laughed so often and so heartily. He had that rare thing, a rich, ringing laugh. Gertrude Coppard had watched him, fascinated. He was so full of colour and animation, his voice ran so easily into comic grotesque, he was so ready and so pleasant with everybody. Her own father had a rich fund of humour, but it was satiric. This man's was different: soft, non-intellectual, warm, a kind of gambolling.

She herself was opposite. She had a curious, receptive mind which found much pleasure and amusement in listening to other folk. She was clever in leading folk to talk. She loved ideas, and was considered very intellectual. What she liked most of all was an argument on religion or philosophy or politics with some educated man. This she did not often enjoy. So she always had people tell her about themselves, finding her pleasure so.

In her person she was rather small and delicate, with a large brow, and dropping bunches of brown silk curls. Her blue eyes were very straight, honest, and searching. She had the beautiful hands of the Coppards. Her dress was always subdued. She wore dark blue silk, with a peculiar silver chain of silver scallops. This, and a heavy brooch of twisted gold, was her only ornament. She was still perfectly intact, deeply religious, and full of beautiful candour.

Walter Morel seemed melted away before her. She was to the miner that thing of mystery and fascination, a lady. When she spoke to him, it was with a southern pronunciation and a purity of English which thrilled him to hear. She watched him. He danced well, as if it were natural and joyous in him to dance. His grandfather was a French refugee who had married an English barmaid—if it had been a marriage. Gertrude Coppard watched the young miner as he danced, a certain subtle exultation like glamour in his movement, and his face the flower of his body, ruddy, with tumbled black hair, and laughing alike whatever partner he bowed above.

She thought him rather wonderful, never having met anyone like him. Her father was to her the type of all men. And George Coppard, proud in his bearing, handsome, and rather bitter; who preferred theology in reading, and who drew near in sympathy only to one man, the Apostle Paul; who was harsh in government, and in familiarity ironic; who ignored all sensuous pleasure:—he was very different from the miner. Gertrude herself was rather contemptuous of dancing; she had not the slightest inclination towards that accomplishment, and had never learned even a Roger de Coverley. She was puritan, like her father, high-minded, and really stern. Therefore the dusky, golden softness of this man's sensuous flame of life, that flowed off his flesh like the flame from a candle, not baffled and gripped into incandescence by thought and spirit as her life was, seemed to her something wonderful, beyond her.

He came and bowed above her. A warmth radiated through her as if she had drunk wine.

“Now do come and have this one wi' me,” he said caressively. “It's easy, you know. I'm pining to see you dance.”

She had told him before she could not dance. She glanced at his humility and smiled. Her smile was very beautiful. It moved the man so that he forgot everything.

“No, I won't dance,” she said softly. Her words came clean and ringing.

Not knowing what he was doing—he often did the right thing by instinct—he sat beside her, inclining reverentially.

“But you mustn't miss your dance,” she reproved.

“Nay, I don't want to dance that—it's not one as I care about.”

“Yet you invited me to it.”

He laughed very heartily at this.

“I never thought o' that. Tha'rt not long in taking the curl out of me.”

It was her turn to laugh quickly.

“You don't look as if you'd come much uncurled,” she said.

“I’m like a pig’s tail, I curl because I canna help it,” he laughed, rather boisterously.

“And you are a miner!” she exclaimed in surprise.

“Yes. I went down when I was ten.”

She looked at him in wondering dismay.

“When you were ten! And wasn’t it very hard?” she asked.

“You soon get used to it. You live like th’ mice, an’ you pop out at night to see what’s going on.”

“It makes me feel blind,” she frowned.

“Like a moudiwarp!” he laughed. “Yi, an’ there’s some chaps as does go round like moudiwarps.” He thrust his face forward in the blind, snout-like way of a mole, seeming to sniff and peer for direction. “They dun though!” he protested naïvely. “Tha niver seed such a way they get in. But tha mun let me ta’e thee down some time, an’ tha can see for thysen.”

She looked at him, startled. This was a new tract of life suddenly opened before her. She realised the life of the miners, hundreds of them toiling below earth and coming up at evening. He seemed to her noble. He risked his life daily, and with gaiety. She looked at him, with a touch of appeal in her pure humility.

“Shouldn’t ter like it?” he asked tenderly. “Appen not, it ’ud dirty thee.”

She had never been “thee’d” and “thou’d” before.

The next Christmas they were married, and for three months she was perfectly happy: for six months she was very happy.

A Pause for Thought...

You might have heard of the phrase ‘opposites attract’, and I wonder if that is what happening for Gertrude and Walter. What do we make of their meeting? Do you think that appearances and first impressions count for a lot in meeting a prospective partner?

We know that Gertrude has 'never met anyone like' Walter. Does this influence her feelings towards him further, do you think? And what about these lines: 'Therefore the dusky, golden softness of this man's sensuous flame of life, that flowed off his flesh like the flame from a candle, not baffled and gripped into incandescence by thought and spirit as her life was, seemed to her something wonderful, beyond her.' We seem to get a bit more about the differences between Gertrude and Walter here. I'm particularly interested in what it would feel like to be Gertrude, and how her 'thought and spirit' seems to be restraining her. Perhaps Walter can offer her a new perspective, a chance for something for 'beyond'?

Let's read on a little more, and see what married life has in store for Gertrude and Walter...

He had signed the pledge, and wore the blue ribbon of a tee-totaller: he was nothing if not showy. They lived, she thought, in his own house. It was small, but convenient enough, and quite nicely furnished, with solid, worthy stuff that suited her honest soul. The women, her neighbours, were rather foreign to her, and Morel's mother and sisters were apt to sneer at her ladylike ways. But she could perfectly well live by herself, so long as she had her husband close.

Sometimes, when she herself wearied of love-talk, she tried to open her heart seriously to him. She saw him listen deferentially, but without understanding. This killed her efforts at a finer intimacy, and she had flashes of fear. Sometimes he was restless of an evening: it was not enough for him just to be near her, she realised. She was glad when he set himself to little jobs.

He was a remarkably handy man—could make or mend anything. So she would say:

"I do like that coal-rake of your mother's—it is small and natty."

"Does ter, my wench? Well, I made that, so I can make thee one!"

"What! why, it's a steel one!"

"An' what if it is! Tha s'lt ha'e one very similar, if not exactly same."

She did not mind the mess, nor the hammering and noise. He was busy and happy.

But in the seventh month, when she was brushing his Sunday coat, she felt papers in the breast pocket, and, seized with a sudden curiosity, took them out to read. He very rarely wore the frock-coat he was married in: and it had not occurred to her before to feel curious concerning the papers. They were the bills of the household furniture, still unpaid.

“Look here,” she said at night, after he was washed and had had his dinner. “I found these in the pocket of your wedding-coat. Haven’t you settled the bills yet?”

“No. I haven’t had a chance.”

“But you told me all was paid. I had better go into Nottingham on Saturday and settle them. I don’t like sitting on another man’s chairs and eating from an unpaid table.”

He did not answer.

“I can have your bank-book, can’t I?”

“Tha can ha’e it, for what good it’ll be to thee.”

“I thought—” she began. He had told her he had a good bit of money left over. But she realised it was no use asking questions. She sat rigid with bitterness and indignation.

The next day she went down to see his mother.

“Didn’t you buy the furniture for Walter?” she asked.

“Yes, I did,” tartly retorted the elder woman.

“And how much did he give you to pay for it?”

The elder woman was stung with fine indignation.

“Eighty pound, if you’re so keen on knowin’,” she replied.

“Eighty pounds! But there are forty-two pounds still owing!”

“I can’t help that.”

“But where has it all gone?”

“You’ll find all the papers, I think, if you look—beside ten pound as he owed me, an’ six pound as the wedding cost down here.”

“Six pounds!” echoed Gertrude Morel. It seemed to her monstrous that, after her own father had paid so heavily for her wedding, six pounds more should have been squandered in eating and drinking at Walter’s parents’ house, at his expense.

“And how much has he sunk in his houses?” she asked.

“His houses—which houses?”

Gertrude Morel went white to the lips. He had told her the house he lived in, and the next one, was his own.

“I thought the house we live in—” she began.

“They’re my houses, those two,” said the mother-in-law. “And not clear either. It’s as much as I can do to keep the mortgage interest paid.”

Gertrude sat white and silent. She was her father now.

“Then we ought to be paying you rent,” she said coldly.

“Walter is paying me rent,” replied the mother.

“And what rent?” asked Gertrude.

“Six and six a week,” retorted the mother.

It was more than the house was worth. Gertrude held her head erect, looked straight before her.

“It is lucky to be you,” said the elder woman, biting, “to have a husband as takes all the worry of the money, and leaves you a free hand.”

The young wife was silent.

She said very little to her husband, but her manner had changed towards him. Something in her proud, honourable soul had crystallised out hard as rock.

A Final Pause for Thought...

Well, how we are left feeling about Gertrude and Walter now? Things seem to have changed rather quickly, and the days of early wedded bliss have faded quite drastically. We see that Gertrude tries to ‘open her heart seriously’ to her husband, but to little avail: ‘She saw him listen deferentially, but without understanding. This killed her efforts at a finer intimacy, and she had flashes of fear.’ What do we make of this? Is a sense of understanding and being understood one of the most important things in a marriage? If this is absent, could a marriage really be happy?

What do we make of Walter’s mother? We hear early on in this part she is ‘apt to sneer’ at Gertrude, and she does not seem to sympathise with her daughter-in-law when the truth of Walter’s deceit is revealed. What do we make of her assertion that Gertrude is ‘lucky’ to have a husband like Walter, who ‘takes all the worry of the money, and leaves you a free hand’? It doesn’t seem so lucky, at least not when the truth is kept hidden.

‘Gertrude sat white and silent. She was her father now.’ That’s an interesting remark. What do we make of it, and why should she become aware of it now? Perhaps it is something to do with ‘her proud, honourable soul’ which ‘had crystallised out hard as rock’ in respect to Walter. How do we think that would feel for Gertrude? It seems like a very fundamental, and somewhat final change for her.

We’ll have to leave the story there. The full book is freely available online, so if you’re keen to find out how life unfolds for Gertrude and Walter I would definitely recommend seeking it out.

Time for a poem

We'll pick up with another story again in our next issue, but now a pause for some poetry. Poetry isn't always easy for everyone to get going with. In our Shared Reading groups we read a poem out loud a few times, to give ourselves a bit of time to hear it aloud. Give this a go yourself and see if it helps you to feel comfortable with the words, even if you're still not sure what it's all about!

We aren't looking to find an answer here, or what the person writing it might have meant when they wrote it. We're just looking to see if any feelings or ideas come up when we read it – and often we find that the more time you allow yourself to simply be with the poem, the more thoughts and feelings will come through.

One of the keys is to enjoy yourself: take your time, read it out loud, have a think about any bits you like, or that puzzle you, then... have another read!

This week's Featured Poem is 'If I Had Known' by Alice Dunbar Nelson.

It's quite a common thing to look back at things we've done and choices we've made in our lives and think 'if I had known that was going to happen, I could have done this...or that...'. It certainly feels like Gertrude Morel might have felt that way in respect to her marriage. But what is it that we can learn from looking back, and how helpful is it to us going forward, when we know that we can't change the past?

Let's take a read and see what we make of it.

If I Had Known by Alice Dunbar Nelson

If I had known

Two years ago how drear this life should be,
And crowd upon itself all-strangely sad,
Mayhap another song would burst from out my lips,
Overflowing with the happiness of future hopes;
Mayhap another throb than that of joy.
Have stirred my soul into its inmost depths,
If I had known.

If I had known,

Two years ago the impotence of love,
The vainness of a kiss, how barren a caress,
Mayhap my soul to higher things have soarn,
Nor clung to earthly loves and tender dreams,
But ever up aloft into the blue empyrean,
And there to master all the world of mind,
If I had known.

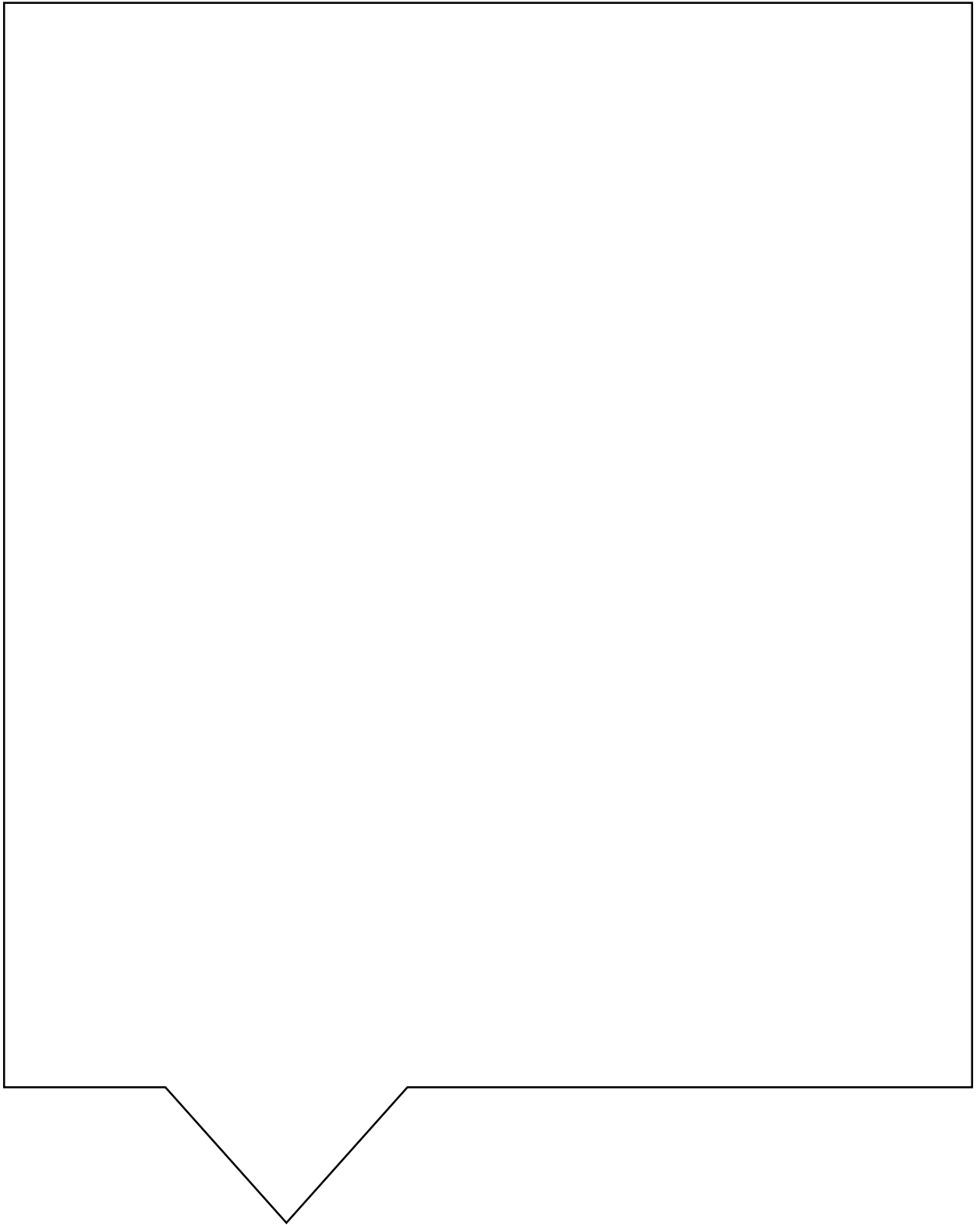
Are there any words or lines that stand out on first reading? Perhaps you want to read it through again, to let things sink in.

There's a sort of sense of suddenness that comes from thinking back, in words like 'burst out', 'overflowing' and 'throb'. Sometimes memories can seem more real than the 'here and now', and I wonder if that's what's going on here.

What about the idea of life being 'drear', and that line 'And crowd upon itself all-strangely sad'? What would that feel like, both in the moment and looking back?

What do we make of 'the impotence of love' and 'the vainness of a kiss'? It almost feels like the past focus on love has made an impact on the present – perhaps it was misguided? Then there's the 'higher things'. What might they be? Do they relate to 'all the world of mind', I wonder?

*We've left this page blank for you to make notes,
draw a picture, have a go at writing yourself or jot
down something you'd like to tell us...*



As well as reading materials, we've also included a puzzle for you to have a go at while you're having a cuppa. In the story we heard a little bit about Gertrude and Walter being married. Below are ten words which relate to weddings, but they've been jumbled up. See if you can make out what they really are by putting them in the right order.

Wedding Wordjumble

1. EMOYNCRE
2. LSEAI
3. EMNGNTGEAE
4. LFRSEWO
5. GSTESU
6. OTPINECER
7. MTTMIEMONC
8. IINVTNOAIT
9. EYHOMNOON
10. VERROFE