

- GERTRUDE MOREL

Gertrude Morel is one of the most formidable mothers in all of Western literature. To the narrator, and perhaps to Paul Morel, she is both a giving, selfless nurturer of her children and a possessive tyrant.

This small, resolute woman with luxuriant hair and a grim, determined mouth is the axis from which her children, particularly William and Paul, spin out into life. She instills them with self-confidence, social and intellectual ambitions, and a great joy in living. At the same time, she dislikes her sons' girlfriends and

makes it difficult for her sons to find happiness with a mate. Gertrude also lets her sons know that she's living just for them, placing enormous pressure on their ability to "cut the apron strings."

Mrs. Morel is a character you must watch carefully. She often seems to be doing wonderful things for her children, but the resulting impact on their lives cripples them. Many readers feel that Mrs. Morel is so important to William and Paul that all other women come up short when compared to her. These readers believe that William dies, not of pneumonia, but really because he can't resolve the conflict he feels between marrying his girlfriend Gyp and remaining devoted to his mother. Paul, too, will have a hard time feeling satisfied with his lovers. At one point he even says that he'll never find a wife while his mother lives- nor does he. According to modern psychological theory, as formulated by Freud and others, Gertrude Morel has replaced her husband with her sons.

Although Mrs. Morel adores her sons, she is certainly capable of hate. We see this in her relationship with her coarse, uneducated husband and with Paul's first love, Miriam. Gertrude, brought up in the respectable middle class, can't accept her husband's irresponsibility or drinking habits. As a result, she writes him out of her life and puts all her passion into the children. As you read the novel you'll have to decide for yourself if her hatred of Walter Morel is justified. Gertrude's dislike of Miriam can be viewed as justified or unjustified. Some readers agree with Gertrude that Miriam tries to suck all the energy out of Paul's life and make him into a disembodied spirit. Other readers feel that Gertrude's dislike of Miriam is selfish. She fears the young girl will take her son away from her.

Although Gertrude Morel makes it difficult for Paul to find a suitable mate, she clearly doesn't want him left alone when she dies. She wants him to find satisfaction in work and marriage. Gertrude feels he'll achieve this by marrying a lady and becoming a respectable, successful middle-class husband. But her idea of a suitable lifestyle may not be what Paul actually needs or desires. Mrs. Morel is right, however, to discern that her son needs a wife who equals him in strength, intelligence, and warmth.

While Mrs. Morel comes across as icy and overly pious at times, Paul tells you that at one time she had known true passion with her husband and that it awakened her need for a full, vital life. She hates to give up living, even when she's terminally ill. Mrs. Morel wants to cling to life and realize her social and intellectual aspirations through Paul. When she finally dies, his emptiness seems total. Paul has been both blessed and cursed with such an extraordinary mother.