

## The Ideological Structure in “The Rocking-Horse Winner”: Evils of Modernism and Consumerism



### Literature

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### Abstract

Short stories of D. H. Lawrence stay in the background in spite of the fact that he is hailed as one of the most accomplished short story writers in English literature. For that reason, it is not possible to come across with many studies dealing with his short stories. By taking this into consideration, this article will analyze Lawrence’s “The Rocking-Horse Winner” by focusing on its multilayered ideological structure in which the representatives of a large section of bourgeois society are in essence criticized through its distorted and self-disruptive values. Some issues and concepts like disintegration of family, debunking of motherhood myth, evils of consumerism, bourgeois morality, commodity fetishism and alienation will also be used in order to unearth Lawrence’s stance in the story. In this context, Marxist literary theory will be employed.

### 1. Introduction

“The Rocking Horse Winner” by D. H. Lawrence is a fascinating story with its structural feature and symbolic extension. It has divided critics because this story can be interpreted from many different perspectives. For example, some critics like W. R. Martin and Robert Gorham Davis allege that “The Rocking Horse Winner” is a mythic tale focusing on a boy who is seeking love and identity. Some critics like W. D. Snodgrass say that it is a kind of psychoanalytic exploration of sexuality along with Oedipus complex in which Paul aims to replace his father by trying to satisfy the needs of his mother. Likewise, some critics like Daniel P. Watkins and Greg Bentley assert that this story is a didactic one which is preaching morality in which greediness, reification and materialism are satirized.

Although there are such diverse readings of this story, it is possible to state that “The Rocking Horse Winner” is a captivating one in which the devastating potency of money upon individuals and families along with its painful consequences are criticized. It is also a sarcastic commentary on corruption and self-destruction.

In “The Rocking Horse Winner” (1926), Paul’s obsession with luck and how it can provide money for his family is elaborated. Paul thinks that the circumstances in his family are financially getting worse, and he is resolved to find luck for his mother. Because his mother accustomed to luxury and living beyond her means feels that their financial problems are a result of her marriage to an unlucky man. Meanwhile, their house constantly whispers and torments Paul and his two sisters as if it absorbed their own thoughts and senses. Paul discovers that he can guess the winner of the horse race by riding his rocking-horse. Immediately, he tells his secret to the gardener of the house, Basset, and his uncle, Oscar Creswell, successively. His uncle, in the beginning, does not believe in what Paul claims, however he is assured when the predictions of Paul come true. Subsequently, Paul shares part of his winnings with his mother in a secret way by making it seem that this sum of money, which amounts to five thousand pounds, has been given as a gift by someone. In spite of this, the unspoken phrases and voices in the house like “There must be more money” (791) begin to scream for more money. Then, Paul tries to guess the winners of

the next race so that he could satisfy his mother's desires for more money. Yet, he cannot guess and becomes more hopeless and desperate day by day. One day, his mother finds him riding his rocking horse in a mad rush, and Paul collapses and lapses into a coma, shouting the name of the Derby Winner, Malabar. Afterwards, Basset and his uncle bet on that horse and win. It is imparted to Paul that they won eighty thousand pounds from that race. Unfortunately, Paul dies in the end.

Actually, there are two possible aspects of "The Rocking Horse Winner", which are closely related with the plot structure and content of the story. First aspect is associated with the remarkable and notable aesthetics of literature including fantasy elements, highly-visible symbols, suggestive metaphors, ironies and details. As to the second aspect, it is about the ideological structure of the story in which materialism, reification and objectification are essentially criticized because they cause alienation, corruption and disintegration among family members. This ideological layer of the story is distantly suggested and implicated by dramatized actions and aesthetics of literature. In this regard, this article will focus on aesthetics of literature and reveal that Lawrence attacks the capitalist and industrial system along with their alienating, corrupting and disintegrating effects on the lives of common people in distant and objective ways.

## 2. Fantasy Elements in "The Rocking Horse Winner"

There are primarily three fantasy elements in the story which are respectively the whispering house, the wooden rocking horse and Paul's ability to foretell the winners of the races. Through these fantasy elements, Lawrence suggestively criticizes materialism and industrialism. Therefore, a close-reading will unearth the multi-layered ideological structure of these fantasy elements in the story.

### 2.1. The Whispering House

The whispering house is one of the fantasy elements in the story. Paul's home perpetually whispers. It screams as "There must be more money" (791). After a while, Paul is constantly exposed to the whisper and eventually obsessed with it. He tries to suppress the scream by trying to make money for his mother, Hester who "started with all advantages, yet she had no luck ... she could not love them" (790). This whisper is the basic impulse which forces Paul to search for luck and earn money. Then, he can satisfy the needs and desires of his mother, and he can be approved by her. In fact, the whisper emblemizes transformation of family greed into love of money and communicates itself to the children in a devious way. In a similar way Charles Koban states that:

Hester romanticizes the family greed into mystical love of money, as personified in the whispering house, which "came to be haunted by the unspoken phrase: There must be more money". And her mystical abstraction communicates itself insidiously to the children, making them insecure and self-conscious... (Koban, 1978, p. 393)

This unspoken phrase prevailing the house symbolizes a number of different things as well. For instance, it is the symbol and whisper of consumerism and materialism in which people are directed to spend more than they earn. Hester is a good example of consumerist and materialist culture in the story. She, with petty-bourgeois tendencies, cannot take comfort in the economic

situation of her family and tries to find more money so that she could spend more. In a similar way, “There must be more money” also suggests that even the tiniest corner of life sphere is not free of materialism’s domination and as an outcome the ruling class sustains its hegemonic position in an easier way. In this point, Robert L. Heilbroner in *The Nature and Logic of Capitalism* argues that the ruling class constitutes culture and shapes relationships, mindsets and attitudes of society (Heilbroner, 1985, p. 36-7). Considering this argument, the unspoken whisper is in the service of an invisible hand which regulates the relationships, behaviors and mindsets of the characters causing alienation, disintegration and corruption.

## 2.2. The Wooden Rocking Horse

The wooden rocking horse, the second fantasy element in the story, is also a significant symbol working against the vitality of the spiritual values of the family. Indeed, these values like warmth, unity and cooperation are already dead because members of the family are alienated to each other.

Basically, it is possible to discuss that the wooden rocking horse is associated with commodity fetishism and unproductive labor. According to Daniel P. Watkins, “The Rocking Horse Winner” is one of Lawrence’s most savage and compact critiques of what he elsewhere calls the god-damn bourgeoisie and of individuals who, despite their natural or potential goodness, swallow the culture bait and hence become victims to the world they believe holds the key to human happiness (Watkins, 1987, p. 298).

Moreover, the class nature of labor in the story is symbolically revealed in terms of adult and non-adult worlds. The social reality of their worlds is dominated by parents and the real concern of them is to keep their social position up by having sufficient money. Although they have a small income, they are never depicted as working productively and actively. Paul, in a way, works for them. However, no matter how much he works and earns, that sum of money is not enough for them since it cannot meet the desires of his parents. This kind of work is viewed as a way of producing greater sums of income instead of satisfying their basic human needs, and this causes it to be socially unproductive. In parallel with this argument, Watkins states that:

... parents are not capitalists in the crudest sense (that is, they are not drawn as investors of money); what is important is that they both set the tone (economic scarcity) and determine the values (consumerism) of the world they inhabit, and in addition expropriate the wealth that others produce for their own consumption” (Watkins, 1987, p. 298).

From a different point of view, it is also possible to categorize Paul as a capitalist since he bets on horse race and gains a profitable return. However, what he invests is his own skills and this fact cannot be overlooked. He sells his “skills to generate wealth that he is not free to possess, but that is necessary to the maintenance of existing social relations” (Watkins, 1987, p. 299). In this regard, it is more rational to categorize Paul as a worker for his mother rather than as a capitalist whereas his parents, especially his mother, can be classified as an exploiter of labor.

The alienation theory of Marx in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* is also beneficial to amplify the estrangement process of Paul. There are four aspects of alienation.

In the first type of estrangements, workers are alienated to the product of their works. In the second type, they are estranged from the labor process. In the third step, they are alienated to their human nature. Alienation of man to man is the fourth and final aspect of alienation process (Marx, 1844, p. 29). Based on this argument, Paul, who has been classified as a worker, becomes increasingly alienated and fearful because he is alienated to the product of his work the value of which is not objectified. He is not valued and praised for his success and driven to a sort of insanity in which he is not gratified with what he is producing. As a result, Paul loses his sense of personality and dies. In a way, his lack of self-worth, self-meaning and his frustrated need for self-actualization causes his death. As Allen Wood discusses

... the systematic cause of the fact that people in bourgeois society cannot sustain a sense of meaning or self-worth is that they find themselves in conditions where their need for self-actualization is frustrated, where they are unable to develop and exercise their human capacities. (Wood, 2004, p. 23)

Paul's situation is similar to that of individuals under capitalism who are seen as a source of commodities, and this leads them to be viewed only as intangible economic quantities (Marx, 1844, p. 34). In this context, human beings are not valued for their individualistic personalities but for their economic functions (Marx, 1867, p. 46). They become spiritually unfulfilled and are estranged from each other. They successively become alienated to the product of their work, labor process, their human nature and themselves. Bearing this argument in mind, Paul's losing his sense of personality and self-worth along with his death at the end of the story symbolizes the destruction and exploitation process of human beings under money-oriented system.

Another significant element associated with the rocking horse is the concept of commodity fetishism. In Marxist terminology, this concept is related with commodification and reification. According to this concept, commodities are not produced for use but for sale, and thus they are not valued for their function but for their price (Marx, 1844, p. 34). Under capitalist production conditions, the intrinsic qualities of a product are not important since what creates its value is the social value attached to it by exchange value and society. Therefore, human relations are reified and everything related with human beings become an extension and function of money (Marx, 1867, p. 46-47). In this sense, M. Keith Booker similarly states that

The commodity thus represents the embodiment of powerful and mysterious hidden forces, which in some cases endows the commodity with an almost mystical quality and leads individuals to become enthralled with the commodity, thus making the commodity, a fetish, or the object of an intense emotional attachment. (Booker, 1995, p.73)

In the story, Paul aligns himself with the wooden rocking horse. The rocking horse with its "mechanical gallop" (793) and "arrested prance" (802) has mystical qualities. Paul also constructs an emotional attachment because it is a means for him to suppress the whispering house and reach money. Besides, the wooden rocking horse in "The Rocking Horse Winner" is directly linked with commodity fetishism since human relations are reified and human powers are attributed to inanimate objects (Cox 1998). For example, Paul "slashes the horse on the neck with the little whip" while he is on the back of the rocking horse. This symbolically bears the characteristic of commodification and reification. It symbolizes the potential of brutality that the ruling class can have for more money.

Along with unproductive labor and commodity fetishism, this wooden rocking horse alludes to a great many connotations, as well. For instance, the rocking horse mechanically rocks backward and forward, and this implicates monotony and mechanization under industrial production during which alienation process is experienced. Another interesting interpretation of the horse is where Robert G. Lawrence associates this wooden rocking horse with the famous wooden horse of Trojan horse. He argues that “Paul’s wooden horse deceived him in the long run, as he desperately used it as an agent by which he hoped to escape from his problems; yet it did no more than lead him more deeply into a trap” (Lawrence, 1963, p. 324). The rocking horse is, therefore, seen as a symbol of deception, which has no good for its possessors at present despite the fact that it operated to the advantage of its possessors in history. Another striking characteristic related with the rocking horse is that it stays stationary though it moves. Correspondingly, Paul cannot advance and becomes more isolated and alienated in spite of his creativity in terms of producing wealth for his mother. Actually, this is also an emblematic connotation of the fact that you are, in the end, doomed to failure under money-dominated system no matter how much you struggle. Similarly, Watkins states:

He is never satisfied with what he produces because it in no way relieves the pressure that his world places on him, and thus his anxiety and alienation grow to the point of destroying any sense of real personal worth and removing him literally from all meaningful social exchange, as when he takes his rocking horse to his bedroom and rides alone late into night trying to find the key to wealth. (Watkins, 1987, p. 300)

Another “Lawrencean” (Tedlock, 1963, p. 26) symbol that functions to depict a reality through details is the horse names in the story. They are real and associated with the colonial and industrial past of British Empire (Snodgrass, 1958, p. 196). Here, Lawrence criticizes the historical and industrial background of Britain, as well. At this point, W. D. Snodgrass in his article focusing on the socio-economic, religious and sexual dimension of the story along with some of Lawrence’s inner thoughts states that:

Paul’s first winner, Singhalese, and his last, Malabar, have names which refer to British colonial regions of India. (A third name, Mirza, suggests “Mirzapur”- still another colonial region.) India is obviously one of the focal points of the modern disease of colonial empire; for years Malabar and Singhalese were winners for British stockholders and for the British people in general. (Snodgrass, 1958, p. 195)

In this regard, British government, in a way, gambled upon people they have never seen and survived through the exploitation of the work of others. Although British government enjoyed a luxury and prosperity, they were always dissatisfied. To suppress this dissatisfaction, they wanted to fill their so-alleged needs with more luxury (Snodgrass, 1958, p. 195). However, they lost in the end. They also lost their souls by chasing after money. This situation is similar to that of Paul in which he loses his self-worth and dies at the end of the story although he enjoys an illusionary wealth before he goes into coma.

Likewise, W. R. Martin also focuses on the fact that horse names in the story correspond to real names in history while he touches on the relationship between real life and the unliving imitation which creates an irony in “The Rocking Horse Winner”. He points out:

The real and lively race-horses, whose names- Sansovino, Daffodil, Lancelot, Mirza, Singhalese, Blush of Dawn, Lively Spark- resound insistently through the story, represent with

almost crude emblematic clarity the possibilities in a fully lived life and are in ironic contrast to the wooden horse, which, with its “springs”, “mechanical gallop” and “arrested prance” is the symbol of the un-lived, merely mimetic, life of Paul’s parents. (Martin, 1962, p. 65)

Taking these arguments of Martin and Snodgrass into consideration, it is seen that Lawrence criticizes industrialism and its effects from a different perspective by implicitly employing a detail about a historical reality. Moreover, this is another example of Lawrence’s objective partisanship in which he unobtrusively instills suspicion and mistrust about the colonialist history of Great Britain.

### 2.3. Paul’s Ability to Foretell the Winner of the Horse Races

Paul’s ability to foretell the winners of the horse races is the third fantasy element in the story. This fantasy item is of significance since it makes the story resemble to some “well-known fairy tales and magical stories in which the hero bargains with evil powers for personal advantages or forbidden knowledge” (Snodgrass, 1958, p. 192). In these stories, the hero of the story loses although he becomes successful in the beginning. In this context, the protagonist of “The Rocking Horse Winner”, Paul, was successful in terms of gaining money, however at the end of the story he loses and dies: “The boy died in the night” (804). This situation is similar to what Gordon and Tate alleges in which Paul paid his penalty with his death since he invoked strange gods (cited in Snodgrass, 1958, p. 193). Besides, witch-myths tell us that witches were riding hobby-horses and rocking themselves into a kind of magical and prophetic hypnosis (Snodgrass, 1958, p. 193). This situation is also similar to that of Paul as the eyes of Paul twinkle blue and strange while riding his rocking-horse. He does not speak to anyone as “he only glared down on them in silence” (793). His sisters are also afraid of him at that moment: “He’s always riding like that! I wish he’d leave off” said his elder sister Joan” (793). He looks into the face of the wooden rocking-horse: “Its red mouth was slightly open; its big eye was wide and glassy-bright” (793). Then, he gets caught up in riding his horse and experiences a kind of frenzy which is foreshadowed by the story. In this respect, Snodgrass similarly alleges that Paul becomes

more and more engrossed in his doom as the story progresses, he becomes “wild-eyed and strange . . . his big blue eyes blazing with a sort of madness.” We hear again and again of the uncanny blaze of his eyes until finally, at his collapse, they are “like blue stones”. Clearly enough, he is held in some self-induced prophetic frenzy, a line of meaning carefully developed by the story. (Snodgrass, 1958, p. 193)

As explored, Paul’s ability to foretell the winner of the races is associated with the concept of occultism. Occultism is the study of occult which means the knowledge of hidden and mystic in Oxford dictionary. It includes mysticism, magic, religion, divination, spiritualism and astrology and etc.. Considering the concept of occultism, it is possible to assert that Paul, who is a winner, is seen as a diviner by Bassett, and Bassett “takes an explicitly worshipful tone towards him [Paul]” (Snodgrass, 1958, p. 193). Furthermore, while talking to Uncle Oscar about Paul’s ability, Bassett uses a “secret, religious voice” (797) and labels this ability “as if he [Paul] had it from heaven” (797). In this context, the concept of occultism can be linked with “invisible hand” metaphor of Adam Smith in liberal/capitalist economy (Smith, 1937, p. 758). This mystic metaphor implicates

that there is a hidden hand in the market and it regulates everything within market. As Smith in his *The Wealth of Nations* explores:

Every individual ... generally neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it ... He intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for society that it was no part of his intention. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. (Smith, 1937, p. 758)

Paul's ability to foretell the winner of the races in a mystic way is in parallelism with the mystic 'invisible hand' metaphor in liberalism. This imposes that invisible hand in the nature is on the side of winners. Therefore, losers in the system should give in to winners because winners are "from heaven" (797) and seen as diviners. They also deserve to be called as "master" (802) just as Bassett does in the story. Within this scope, this is another subtle and witty satire upon mystical and religious structure of industrialism and capitalism in the story.

### 3. Disintegration of Family in "The Rocking-Horse Winner"

When family structure in "The Rocking Horse Winner" is taken into account, it is seen that there is a disintegrated and fragmented family. This is substantially related with money because money is what holds the whole family together even at the beginning of the story: "There was never enough money. The mother had a small income, and the father had a small income ..." (790). As the story develops, Hester is suggested to be responsible for this disintegration. Even the unspoken phrase in the story, "There must be more money" (791) functions to manifest Hester's unconscious desire for privilege and power. Within this framework, Lawrence does not characterize Hester as a mother archetype that treats each of her children as individuals, help them set their own path, do best for their children and deserve the approval of her children. Instead, she is depicted as a mother who is villain, loathsome, selfish, neglectful and obsessed with money. In this way, the concept of motherhood is also debunked. Essentially, these characteristics are associated with materialism, alienation and consumerism within industrial and capitalist system as clarified earlier. In this part, the reasons of the disintegration and fragmentation will be explored with precise examples from the story.

The main reason that causes the disintegration of the family is related with Hester's petty-bourgeois morality: consumerism and materialism. As a result, family members are gradually alienated to each other, and disintegration process of the family quickens. In the story, Hester tends to spend more and more so that she could align herself with upper class. In order to earn more money to meet her desires, she decides to work and tries to step into public sphere. She also interiorizes characteristics traditionally aligned with men like autonomy, power and etc. After becoming a part of public sphere which actually belonged to industrial space in the turn of the century, she is increasingly alienated to her family. According to Greg Bentley (2010), Hester internalizes the characteristics which are traditionally associated with manhood such as power, privilege and wholeness although she is a woman. Accordingly, she tries to suppress feminine qualities attributed to women like empathy, understanding and childrearing: she struggles to take

on socially ascribed role of motherhood and becomes obsessively intentive towards her children. No matter how much she tries to “put on the appropriate signs of love”, her “signifiers lack substance”; and thence her love cannot be objectified and she behaves in a pretentious way (Bentley, 2010, p. 56). As a consequence, she is estranged from her children, and she debunks the concept of motherhood. In fact, Hester oscillates between being a mother and working. In this sense, Bentley points out that Hester “is caught in a dilemma, for she alternates between her desire to embody a private, autonomous subjectivity and a public, social identity rooted in her need to fulfill the conventional roles as a wife, mother, and social matriarch” (Bentley, 2010, p. 55).

However, Hester chooses to work so that she could, in a way, meet her desires. Then, she goes out of the domestic sphere and works in her friend’s studio in a secret way:

Hester went into town nearly everyday. She had discovered that she had an odd knack of sketching furs and dress materials, so she worked secretly in the studio of a friend who was the chief artist for the leading drapers. She drew the figures of ladies in fur and ladies in silk and sequins for the newspaper advertisements (799).

Indeed, this proves that Hester puts her role of being a good mother and housewife to one side and takes a step into the world of business and trade. Nevertheless, she is in harmony with social decorum in her time. She works in a secret way so that she could not be publicly known as a working woman. Yet, this is not about traditionally and socially determined roles of women. This is substantially about her pretentious character. She does not want to lay bare that her family is in need of money, otherwise her upper-class environment can backbite her. To quote Bentley, he accordingly points out that Hester

simultaneously remains bound by the roles and ideologies of traditional women, for she works “secretly” and for a friend. As Lawrence suggests, Hester conforms to social decorum. She works for a friend, which suggests that she is unable or unwilling to test her knowledge and skills in a genuinely competitive marketplace . . . she works “secretly” because she doesn’t want it publicly known that she must work outside the home in order to overcome her perception of her family’s lack. (Bentley, 2010, p. 60-61)

Another example related with Hester’s petty bourgeois inclination is about her greed and passion to earn more in a quantitative way. In order to achieve this, Hester becomes more competitive, furious and frantic:

This young woman artist earned several thousands pounds a year, but Paul’s mother only made several hundreds, and she was again dissatisfied. She so wanted to be first in something, and she did not succeed, even making sketches for the drapery advertisements (799)

In these sentences, it is seen that Hester is not happy with her own talents and skills, instead she wants to objectify her skills and talents in terms of money. She, who earns “several hundred” (799), is running against her employer, who makes “several thousand pounds a year” (799). In this respect, the activities of Hester are transformed into a kind of competition in an ironical way: “She desires to embody absolute power, privilege, and wholeness . . . She wants “to be first” socially and economically. Unable to do so, however, she feels dissatisfied; she feels castrated” (Bentley, 2010, p. 61).

In this context, it can be argued that this situation of Hester is primarily related with petty-bourgeois morality and tendencies in which individuals are victims of egoism and selfishness.



They work for their own desires and benefits. They follow their self-interests and attach importance to their own safety. As exemplified earlier, such inclinations of Hester causes alienation within family. And this alienation results in the disintegration of family which is revealed through the tragic death of Paul in the end. In addition, the concept of motherhood is also debunked through Hester since she is emblemized with negative connotations.

#### 4. Conclusion

“The Rocking-Horse Winner” has a multilayered ideological structure in which industrial capitalism is effectually criticized through its alienating, corrupting and disintegrating impacts upon the lives of common people and their families. However, in spite of his Marxist-like opposition and hostility against money-oriented system, Lawrence ironically defends the institution of family by implicitly reconstructing and imposing a number of morality concepts like conservation of the traditional family structure. This in fact creates an ideological contradiction because the institution of family is in the service of the interests of the bourgeoisie according to Marxists. In this point, it can be pointed out that Lawrence basically creates awareness in the eyes of the bourgeois class. He also stimulates bourgeoisie to take precautions against industrially-induced social happenings by revealing the deficiencies and problems under capitalism such as alienation and disintegration, and prolongs capitalism’s life. Therefore, Lawrence essentially legitimates and reforms the prevailing mode of production, capitalism, in the story.

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