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A Psychoanalytic Critique of Lawrence’s “Rocking-Horse Winner”

**Summary**

* The story opens with the description of a mother who despite “advantages” marries for love and is unhappy in her motherhood.
	+ This description could indicate issues D.H. Lawrence might have found in his own mother
* The narrator describes the family and setting, including a solidly middle class family with an air of superiority (felt themselves superior to anyone in the neighbourhood) despite an atmosphere of financial anxiety
* The family’s (mother’s) expensive taste causes a palpable tension in the house and despite their efforts to make more money, the house itself seems to whisper “There must be more money!”
* Paul, the son, begins asking questions about their possessions and financial status, and his mother explains to him that they are not “lucky” and luck is what often gets people money. Paul believes he is lucky because “God told me!” but his mother seems incredulous and Paul is a bit frustrated by her dismissal of his claim, which “made him want to compel her attention”
	+ Paul seems to want to please his mother by his comments about being lucky. He also seems to want to get her attention. Oedipal elements?
* Paul searches for luck by riding his rocking-horse and imagining himself in a race and “hoping at last to get there.” His sisters are rather put off by his furious riding.
	+ Some odd description here. It almost seems like a sexual act. Considering he is growing out of the nursery, perhaps this is him discovering his sexuality? Masturbation perhaps?
* His mother and uncle (her brother) find Paul riding once, and Oscar, the uncle, asks about the name, only to find that it changes from week to week, often based on the winning horse in the local horse races. Paul’s mother claims it comes from Bassett, the gardener (and horse gambler), with whom Paul talks.
	+ The different horse every week almost sounds like different sexual conquests. That would make the gardener the sexual mentor (wounded in the war, perhaps living vicariously due to his “impotence”?
* Oscar asks Bassett about Paul’s talks with him about racing, and Oscar lets on that Paul puts money down on horses sometimes and when he’s “sure” he always wins. Oscar is intrigued enough to test it, and sure enough, wins some money on a poorly favored horse.
* Oscar seems incredulous about the sums of money Paul claims to be betting but learns from Bassett that Paul seems to have a gift of choosing horses, so Oscar joins the partnership.
* Although Oscar is unsure about the safety of Paul’s gift, he helps Paul anonymously give some of the money (five thousand pounds) to his mother via a fake inheritance that was supposed to parceled out over five years. Paul’s mother wants it all now, and via the family lawyer, Paul allows her to have it all.
	+ Paul’s desire to please his mother yet not with her knowing may be an indication that he’s timid about this “desire” he has for her attention. Perhaps he vaguely knows it’s wrong to desire his mother.
* The house only calls louder for more money, and it sends Paul into agony of nerves. The next race is a big one and he wants to win. His mother, however, is nervous about his condition and asks that he goes to the seaside. Paul insists on staying for the derby and then leaving.
	+ Might the house represent the atmosphere of sexual tension? Paul’s mother explains that the father is unlucky (impotent?) and Paul seems determined to prove himself “capable” of providing through his luck.
* Paul’s mother agrees and we find out that the rocking-horse has been moved to Paul’s bedroom. His mother argues that Paul is too big for his rocking-horse, but Paul claims “He keeps me company when I’m there.”
	+ If the rocking-horse itself has some affiliation with virility or masturbation, then Paul having it in his room makes it a more “intimate” setting.
* Two days before the race, Paul’s mother is at a party and Paul takes the opportunity to ride his horse and find the winning horse’s name. His mother seems to sense her son’s distress, and despite being assured by the nanny that Paul is asleep, his mother leaves the party early to check on him. Outside his room, “There was a strange, heavy, and yet not loud noise. Her heart stood still. It was a soundless noise, yet rushing and powerful. Something huge, in violent, hushed motion.”
	+ Perhaps this is Paul’s final transition into “manhood” and his mother can sense it happening. The description is quite detailed (and ambiguous) for being a rocking-horse.
* Paul’s mother rushes in (and turns on the light) to find Paul “madly surging on the rocking-horse” just as Paul “gets there” and shouts the winning horses name. He falls into a “brain fever” and his mother stays by his side.
	+ This sounds much like a scene of a boy being “walked in on” by his mother. Strangely, they are both wearing green, which might indicate another connection between them. This scene may also be the literary and Freudian “climax” where Paul is finally able to “demonstrate his virility”
* For three days Paul is in some sort of coma. When he is told that he won seventy thousand pounds, he raves to his mother that he is lucky and repeats how much money he has won. Later that night, Paul dies and Oscar “comforts” Paul’s mother by saying she’s gained all that money but lost a son and that Paul’s “best gone out of a life where he rides his rocking-horse to find a winner.”
	+ Paul seems to die from ecstasy and exhaustion as if it was all a sexual act, but he’s better off dead than spend his whole life “riding a rocking-horse” than being in a real race.

**Questions:**

1. Why is the father only mentioned in context of being unlucky? Why did Lawrence make him an absentee character?
2. What does luck/money represent in this story in regards to oppression? Might financial strains in the story be Lawrence’s way of transferring sexual frustration?
3. Is Paul fighting a Oedipus complex? Is his desire to prove to his mother that he is “lucky” an attempt to prove his sexual viability?
4. How might horse racing and Paul’s rocking horse be interpreted as free association?
5. What is the significance of Paul’s death at the end in regards to the other psychoanalytic elements of this story?

**Psychoanalytic Profile of D.H. Lawrence**

Lawrence’s “Rocking Horse Winner” offers much regarding a psychoanalytic analysis. Paul’s apparent Oedipal complex may indicate that Lawrence himself once struggled with gaining his mother’s attention. It should also be noted that Paul’s father never manifested as a character, indicating that he was not a particularly influential factor in Paul’s pursuit of his mother. With him present, Paul would likely have not chosen to gamble, but instead emulate his father. This may indicate that Lawrence had an absentee or weak father figure, to whom Lawrence did not feel he could look up. The veiled sexual contexts of the story would also indicate that Lawrence may be unconsciously a being of high libido, perhaps fixated on the phallic stage. This appears supported by the symbol of the rocking-horse (masturbation) as a substitute for the real horse races (sex). Money may also be a real issue for Lawrence as a transference of his sexual frustrations or libido energy. The gambling, which was indicated in the story as an addiction, may also be a veiled acknowledgment of Lawrence’s own subconscious addiction to (or fixation on) sex. His story smacks of a struggle between the id through his rather odd descriptions, and the ego, which attempts to temper the truth through the story of a young boy. There seems very little detail that supports Lawrence’s psychological influence of the superego, as shown through the mother’s difficulty in loving her children and the concept of love itself. On the other hand, the mother herself (who does appear detached) may represent some manifestation of the superego, who tries to love despite her feelings and accepts her poor conditions despite her suffering. Paul might then represent the id and the uncle the ego, who acts as a mediator between the two other characters. Ultimately, the story demonstrates that Freud would have a lot to say about Lawrence and what’s going on below the surface of his consciousness.