**Title: An overview of 'The Rocking-Horse Winner' (modified)**

Short story, 1926

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British Writer ( 1885 - 1930 )

**Other Names Used:** Lawrence, David Herbert Richards; Davison, Lawrence H.; Chambers, Jessie; Lawrence, David Herbert;

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[Piedmont-Marton is the coordinator of the Undergraduate Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin. In the following essay, she discusses various aspects of “The **Rocking**-**Horse** **Winner**.”]

**“The Rocking-Horse Winner”** belongs to the group of stories D. H. Lawrence wrote in the last years of his life. During this period, critics have noted, he abandoned the realism that characterizes his mid-career work, and turned toward a style of short story that more closely resembles the fable or folk tale. In the words of Janice Hubbard Harris, in *The Short Fiction of D. H. Lawrence,* **“The Rocking-Horse Winner”** and other stories of the period, represent the “desire of a fierce and dying man to prophesy, sum up, *assess* the world he is leaving rather than*present* or imitate it.” The story also presents several themes that held Lawrence's attention throughout his career.

The style and tone of **“The Rocking-Horse Winner”** reveal immediately that this story comes from the world of fable and legend. The distant, solemn tone of the narrator “There was a woman who was beautiful,” signals us that this is an old story. Quickly it becomes apparent that this is a quest narrative of some sort. The boy hero will try to win the love of the distant queen/mother. The object of the quest is to gain access to “the centre of her heart [that] was a hard place that could not feel love, no, not for anybody.” The hero rides off, captures the treasure, and returns home to present the riches to his love. But the opening of the story is also foreboding, because “undercutting this fairy tale, however, is another, which forms a grotesque shadow, a nightmare counter to the wish-fulfillment narrative,” in Harris's words. The quest is hopeless, Harris points out, because the mother can never be satisfied and “every success brings a new and greater trial.”

Given the stylized characterization and the symbolic landscape that Lawrence creates in **“The Rocking-HorseWinner”** we can read the meaning of the story on several levels. In the first place, Lawrence seems to be offering a broad satire on rising consumerism in English culture. In particular, this story criticizes those who equate love with money, luck with happiness. The mother with her insatiable desire for material possessions believes that money will make her happy despite the obvious fact that so far it has not. For Lawrence she represents the futility of the new consumer culture in which *luck* and *lucre* mean the same thing. Paul, who learns from his mother to associate love with money, represents the desperate search for values in a cash culture. The force of Lawrence's satire is directed at a society that is dominated by a quest for cash, and at those who buy into the deadly equation of love equals money.

This fable about a boy's doomed attempts to satisfy his mother's desires and win her love also provides Lawrence the opportunity to work out one of the themes that dominate his entire body of work, the relationship between mothers and sons. Lawrence's theory, which is the central concern of one of his most famous novels, ***Sons and Lovers***, is that mothers mold their sons into men who are the opposites of their undesirable husbands. Since mothers know that they cannot change their husbands, they throw all their passion into creating desirable sons, whom, of course, they cannot possess. In **“The Rocking-Horse Winner,”** the husband's inadequacy is explicit. The narrator describes him as “one who was always very handsome and expensive in his tastes, [and] seemed as if he never *would* be able to do anything worth doing.” Making her feelings very clear to her young son, the mother “bitterly” characterizes her husband as “very unlucky.” When she confides in her son that she is dissatisfied with her husband, the mother sets in motion the boys futile quest to please her, to be the man she wants him/her husband to be. After this, the father is hardly mentioned in the story, let alone seen. The mother's desire to make and possess her son constitutes another dark counter-narrative to the story's wish-fulfillment theme.

Both Paul's desire to win his mother's love as well as her desire to make him into the image of an ideal husband are doomed to futility. This kind of misdirected and frustrated sexuality is a persistent theme in Lawrence's fiction and non-fiction writing, and the fable-like quality of **“The Rocking-Horse Winner”** gives Lawrence an opportunity to dramatize some of theories about sexuality on a symbolic level. The course of Lawrence's career demonstrates the evolution of his theories on sexuality and gender. By the end of his life, when **“The Rocking-Horse Winner”** was written, Lawrence's ideas had evolved into his theory of polarity, which is based on the premise that maleness and femaleness are absolute opposites and that men and women cannot have any attributes of the opposite sex. The theory of polarity, which is derived in part from Lawrence's acquaintance with Freudian psychology, asserts that an individual achieves wholeness by balancing his or her energy against another individual's…

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