

Study on Family Writing in *The Rocking Horse Winner*

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ABSTRACT

The Rocking Horse Winner by D.H. Lawrence is a modernist short story and a family drama as well, which tells the tragic family story of a son who loses his life in order to get his mother's love. Based on close reading, this paper expounds the family writing of *The Rocking Horse Winner* from three aspects: the harm of materialism to the family, the tragedy brought by the loveless family, and the ideological connotations of the family writing. It is aimed to better understand the moral and ethical values contained in the story, in order to benefit the development of society and mankind.

Keywords: *The Rocking Horse Winner, D.H. Lawrence, Materialism, Lovelessness, Family writing.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Rocking Horse Winner is a modernist short story written by British writer D.H. Lawrence in 1926, but it is also a family drama. It tells a tragic family story about a son who bets on horses in order to get his mother's love and eventually loses his life. This short story, published in 1933, was made into a full-length film, released in Britain in 1949 and in the United States in 1950, and later adapted for film and television many times, which has not only expanded Lawrence's global influence, but also made it long lasting in the world of literature. In China, *The Rocking Horse Winner* has been widely concerned by scholars. In recent years, the study of *The Rocking Horse Winner* mainly includes the character image, the relationship between characters, the theme of the story, the writing technique and the Oedipus Complex. In addition, new research perspectives have also been added, including ethical literary criticism, alienation theory, archetypal criticism theory, etc.. But up to now, there is no systematic study on family writing in *The Rocking Horse Winner*.

Family ethics is one of the enduring literary motifs. In family writing, there is praise for family affection, but also criticism of abnormal family relations, values and so on. The family writing of *The Rocking Horse Winner* belongs to the latter,

which primarily focuses on the description of Paul's family of origin (mother-son relationship) and Paul's extended family (uncle-nephew relationship). By describing the deformed family of "lack of love" under the cloud of materialism, Lawrence has fully exposed the distortion and depravity of human nature behind the Western developed industrial civilization, and deeply explored the relationships between "man and man" and "man and society". Based on close reading of the text, starting from the destruction power of materialism, this paper is to analyze the family writing and its ideological connotations in *The Rocking Horse Winner*.

2. MATERIALISM: THE DAMAGE TO THE FAMILY

Materialism, quite different from the meaning used in modern times which refers to a family of metaphysical theories, denotes an ethical attitude (usually disapproving), "the belief that money, possessions and physical comforts are more important than spiritual values"[AS Hornby, 2009]. *The Rocking Horse Winner* was created in the 1920s, when the United Kingdom had completed the process of industrialization, urbanization and modernization, becoming the first industrialized and modern country in the world. Industrialization and urbanization had brought unprecedented wealth

to human society. Utilitarianism was the value advocated by the newly rich bourgeoisie who had mastered the wealth. Under the influence of this value, greed and materialism had become the characteristics of the times, money worship and opportunism had prevailed, and traditional social morality had been seriously challenged. Paul's family is a microcosm of that era.

2.1 *The Erosion of Materialism on the Family*

The erosion of materialism on Paul's family is obvious. The story takes place at a time when materialism is prevalent and money is a symbol of social status. Paul's family belongs to the middle class and lives in style, but there is always a tormented sense of lack of money in the family, which means that they have to use materials to maintain their social hierarchy. Materialism has enveloped not only Paul's family of origin, but also his extended family.

2.1.1 *Ruin of Happiness — the Encroachment of Materialism on Paul's Family of Origin*

Materialism has shattered the happiness of Paul's family of origin. Paul's parents are happily married, having a son and two daughters, living in a pleasant house with a garden and discreet servants, and they seem superior to all their neighbors. However, in the context of the Industrial Revolution and the reality of the need for wealth, this family with all its advantages is being slowly torn apart by a sinful material hand. The family is haunted by the voice of "money" unknowingly, happiness disappears sadly, without a trace. Paul's mother Hester loses the ability to love. In order to have enough money to maintain their social status, to gain the approval of those around her, Hester greedily wants to get more material wealth. Her greed has a profound effect on her children, and her value of focusing on luck rather than work, in particular, spells disaster for Paul.

Paul starts making money early at what should have been a carefree age. Listening to his mother's argument that "luck makes money", he rides his rocking-horse to seek for the clue to "luck" and follows his uncle Oscar to bet on horses. The rocking-horse miraculously brings him luck, making him certain that the racehorse Daffodil will be the winner of the Lincoln. Sure enough, he makes 1,500 pounds. Yet, in ancient Greek

mythology, the flower "Daffodil" also refers to "the flower in paradise." In order to win back maternal love and save family happiness, Paul firmly chooses the horse Daffodil. Lawrence here implies that in this family eroded by materialism, the flower of family affection can only bloom in heaven, which also foreshadows Paul's tragic end. When Paul transfers the money he wins to his mother, hoping to make her happy, "her face hardened and became more expressionless. Then a cold, determined look came on her mouth" [Liu Naiyin, 2011]. What she needs is more money to pay off her debts. Maybe because he thinks more money is the only way to regain his mother's love, or maybe because he is also haunted by materialism, Paul is so obsessed with betting horses that he couldn't give it up. Noticing how overwrought Paul is, the mother slowly climbs out of the abyss of materialism, and her motherhood gradually returns from the torment. She persuades Paul to go to the seaside to relax and not care too much about the races. But, the die is cast, and it is too late to mend.

2.1.2 *Lust for Money — the Erosion of Materialism on Paul's Extended Family*

Materialism has also alienated Paul's relationship with Uncle Oscar. As a member of Paul's extended family, Oscar superficially casts plenty of solicitude on Paul. Oscar cares about Paul's family affairs, helps Paul to find a lawyer to pay his mother 5000 pounds, and consoles him after Paul loses a horse gamble. Nevertheless, all the support is derived from financial interest, instead of pure love. In Oscar's psychological realm, the desire for money conquers far more space than that of his nephew. As Oscar makes his debut in the story, Paul is on his search for luck on the rocking-horse. Their dialogue is depicted in detail by Lawrence. "He has different names. He was called Sansovino last week." "Sansovino, eh? Won the Ascot. How did you know his name?" In the foregoing dialogue, both of their knowledge in horse-racing is on full display. On hearing that Paul usually talks about horse racing with Bassett, Oscar instantly becomes intrigued, and inquires about this with Bessett. With Bessett's confirmation, Oscar returns to Paul's house and takes him for a ride in his car, beginning their relationship with the same hobby of horse-racing.

However, in the car Oscar soon steers the conversation towards putting money on a horse, which is a totally different story compared to horse-racing. As a veteran in that field, Oscar is definitely

well aware of the lurking harm in horse-gambling, not to mention what it can bring to a little boy that's still growing like Paul. Doubted by Paul whether or not it is irrational to gamble at such a young age, Oscar proceeds to mislead him: "Not a bit of it. I thought perhaps you might give me a tip for the Lincoln." Then Paul offers his suggestion, and admonishes Oscar not to let it out, because it's a secret between him and Bassett. The uncle's reply is a harsh curse on his former comrade-in-arms, evidence of Oscar's avarice for money and disdain for friendship. Decayed by materialism, Oscar spreads the virus to his nephew. Having conducted a series of meticulous tests, Oscar is eventually convinced of Paul's talent on horse-gambling, and chooses to cooperate with him for the sake of money. By this point, the uncle-nephew relationship has been alienated by materialism, which is now a business relation.

2.2 *The Family's Unspoken Anxiety about Money*

According to Ward and Wackman(1971), materialism is a value in which individuals emphasize the possession of material wealth to obtain happiness and enhance their social status. Engulfed in the shadow of materialism, Paul's family is suffused with anxiety to earn money. "There must be more money! There must be more money!" Nobody says this directly, but it echos around the rocking-horse, the smart doll, and the children's ears. The sense of anxiety and dread permeates the entire story, affecting the characters and their behaviors. By making an analogy with the fact that no body ever says "We are breathing!", Lawrence rips the veil over "money anxiety" in Paul's family.

2.2.1 *Psychological Onslaughts — Reasons for Money Anxiety*

Like some sort of catalyst, social background could fuel money worship. In the 19th century Britain, the productivity was dramatically increased because of the Industrial Revolution and the accumulation of material wealth was accelerated, which, however, was not fairly allocated. The bulk of material wealth was concentrated in a handful of people. "In 1867, 2% of the UK's richest residents possessed 40% of the country's wealth" [Guo Jiahong, 2007]. As the differentiation of material wealth escalated, the impoverished longed for the life of the affluent, while the latter struggled to gather even more wealth. In a society where

materialism has depraved people's values, Paul's family is destined to be affected, tormented by money worship and anxiety about obtaining money.

Social comparison is another contributing factor. Using an omniscient third-person perspective, Lawrence describes the family's living condition objectively as "in style". Nevertheless, Paul's family "felt always an anxiety in the house"—testimony to the family's propensity to compare with others. "Shyness was positively correlated with social comparison orientation and materialism"[Ren Yueqiang et al., 2017]. People who regularly make social comparisons are more afraid of negative judgments and more susceptible to materialistic messages, the exact case for Paul's family. Moreover, vast spectrums of studies have revealed the negative correlation between the degree of the affect brought about by materialism and contentment with life. Profoundly churned by materialism, Paul's family naturally has little satisfaction with life. Hence, anxiety sets in, which can be proven by trails found in the text. For Paul's mother, with love blown to dust and children looking at her coldly, there's no room in her heart for gratification. Her bustling around to earn money is another solid evidence confirming that. To sum up, a string of grievances plunge the family into money anxiety.

2.2.2 *Family Turmoil — Lethal Consequence of Anxiety*

Anxiety in the story is internal, and it leads to family turmoil. The avalanche effect, described by Ruth E. Schwarz and Friedhelm Schwarz (2023) in their book *Self Influencing*, echoes the development of Paul's family turmoil. The avalanche effect refers to the scenario where a chain of past memories recur due to a single event, and finally lead to overwhelming conscious awareness and activities. To some degree, this effect can be used as an explanation for the tragic death of Paul. The family's anxiety for money escalates into Paul's anxiety for family affection over time. To recapture the maternal love, Paul begins to bet on horses. After the horse Spark of Life wins the race, Paul reveals his inner intention directly to Uncle Oscar, "I started it for mother" "I hate our house for whispering". What's more, as Oscar and Paul discuss the proper way to give the money to his mother, Paul insists that the source of the pounds should be kept under wraps to his mother—"I shouldn't like mother to know I was lucky" "She'd stop me." In Paul's mind, there is still a concrete

faith in family affection and the fact that he weighs heavier than money in his mother's heart. Now, for the boy, a link has been established between the house's whispering for money and the agony of losing familial love. Confronted with the loss of maternal love, Paul goes gambling, which further extends the reaction chain to horse-gambling. With the elapse of time, the avalanche effect gets embedded in Paul deeper and deeper.

Paul's mother receives the lump payment of 5000 pounds, which doesn't put the unspoken money anxiety to halt. Rather, it is intensified. "Now-w-w—there must be more money!—more than ever! More than ever!" The stark exclamatory marks embody the aggravation of the family's money anxiety and the catastrophic failure of Paul's pursuit for motherly love. The avalanche effect eventually happens, pumping a cascade of past events into Paul's mind. The deteriorating "deafening" whispering triggers Paul's sorrow over the loss of family bond, which further extends to his insistence on the solution that he has stuck to — horse gambling. Despite his mother's last-ditch effort, Paul's fate is already sealed. The avalanche effect hooks him onto the horse gambling, driving him insane and the situation is irremediable.

3. LOVELESSNESS: THE TRAGEDY OF THE FAMILY

In *The Rocking Horse Winner*, Lawrence creates a palpable atmosphere of family tragedy. There is a sense of impending doom throughout the story. Excessive materialism not only damages the family but also destroys the soul of people, alienates people's hearts, splits the love between people, leading to both spiritual and physical death. A loveless family is destructive, cruel, and especially deadly to children.

3.1 The Disappearance of Love

Love has disappeared under the ravage of materialism. "She married for love, and the love turned to dust." The disappearance of Hester's love comes from a sense of disappointment, and the sense of disappointment comes from the centrifugal force between expectation and reality. Though both Hester and her husband have jobs, their incomes are not enough to maintain the social position they have to maintain. Though her husband works in the town with good prospects, these prospects never materialize. And there is always a grinding sense of

shortage of money in their house, though the style is always kept up.

Money has corroded Hester's love, and wrinkles have covered her beautiful face. Hester was originally a beautiful woman who married for love. Without a doubt, their love and marriage are based on deep emotions, similar outlook on life and many common values. In other words, their marriage is not based on status, wealth, or other external factors. However, when the son asks her why they don't keep a car of their own, she tells him it is because their family is "poor" and because his father is "very unlucky". She tells Paul that she thought she was lucky before she married, but now she thinks she is very unlucky because she has married a husband who could not get more money. Obviously, she has transformed from a romanticist to a materialist. As Engels says, "If only the marriage based on love is moral, then also only the marriage in which love continues"[Friedrich Engels, 2018]. The existence of her love marriage has lost its morality. Materialism has taken away her love and put her love marriage in crisis.

3.2 The Loss of Maternal Love

Money has not just ruthlessly stifled love, but also destroyed maternal love. Hester has three children, "yet she felt they had been thrust upon her, and she could not love them", and "when her children were present, she always felt the center of her heart go hard". Deep down in her heart, there is only the thirst for money, and love no longer exists. This can be seen in the eyes of both Hester and her children. Hester no longer loves her children—the so-called maternal love and motherhood are only deliberately pretended to show others; the children could feel it too—"They looked at her coldly, as if they were finding fault with her". As Hester receives the one thousand pound from Paul on her birthday, she remains cold, absent, and expressionless. When she touches the whole five-thousand, she is still dissatisfied and becomes increasingly greedy. When her son loses his life in winning money to please her and win her love, she could not even show any tender feeling, indicating that her heart has really turned into a stone.

The loss of maternal love also becomes the pain of Paul's life. Maternal love is considered the most selfless and sacred love in the world. It is a natural human emotion. The child will grow up healthily with a loving mother. On the contrary, in Paul's family, what the mother brings to her children is no longer joy and happiness, but misfortune and even

disaster. Paul is a sensitive boy, and he loves his mother and longs for her love, but he sees no love in her eyes, and feels no love from her words. To make her love the family again, he decides to be a lucky man. He says stoutly to his mother, "I am a lucky person". Then he begins his journey of getting good luck. In an unexpected twist, his good luck is both a blessing and a curse. It brings him money, and death as well. Even when he dies, he hasn't got his mother's love and approval. It is really a tragedy, a tragedy made by a nature-twisted mother, a tragedy caused by a money-oriented society.

3.3 *The Absence of Paternal Love*

In Paul's family, paternal love is similarly ravaged by materialism. There is no trace of "paternal love" in Paul's family actually. Lawrence himself came from an unfortunate family, and his parents were estranged from each other due to differences in family and educational backgrounds. His mother turned her hope to her children, and the children were also psychologically alienated from their father under the influence of their mother. The lack of fatherly love in his childhood has affected Lawrence's whole life and his creation. For Paul in *The Rocking Horse Winner*, not only is maternal love lost, but paternal love is also absent. "Paul's father has the same strong desire for money and luxury life as his mother, and they are both alienated by the culture of 'money first' in society"[Zhang Lan, 2017]. Besides, his father does not set a good example for Paul. He does not work hard for the family, but "was always very handsome and expensive in his tastes, seemed as if he never would be able to do anything worth doing", let alone loves his children. On the night when Paul begins to fall ill, his mother even "heard her husband downstairs, mixing a whisky-and-soda". At the moment of Paul's death, only his mother accompanies him without his father.

The absence of paternal love is an important driving force for Paul to step into the abyss. Generally, in family life, the father's companionship with his children can help them gain security and self-esteem in interpersonal relationships. In order to win back the lost family affection, Paul embarks on his journey of betting on horses. This is actually a manifestation of a lack of security and self-esteem. "Paul's father has been absent for a long time during his upbringing. Not only does he contribute to Paul's character flaws, he also fails to notice his struggle in the inferiority complex. Without guidance from his parents, Paul

naturally finds it difficult to get out of his predicament solely through his own struggle, and eventually becomes increasingly trapped and unable to extricate himself"[Wei Pingling, 2011]. Uncle Oscar is more like Paul's father — he takes Paul for rides and accompanies him to horse races. He listens attentively to Paul's advice on horse betting, respects his advice, and gives him a sense of security. For Paul, who lives a restless life all day, it is just Uncle Oscar's false concern and the hope that "luck and money will win back the family love" that gives him the sense of security and self-esteem that should come from his father, which exactly pushes him into death step by step.

4. THE IDEOLOGICAL CONNOTATIONS OF THE FAMILY WRITING

The family writing in *The Rocking Horse Winner* is founded on the special background of that era, reflecting many social problems. The Industrial Revolution started in the Great Britain, "but the consequence of the Industrial Revolution is by no means to turn the Great Britain into a paradise on earth" [Miao Fuguang, 2007]. Under the sky of the industrialized Britain, "the relationship between people becomes strained. Behind the seemingly rich life, human beings are being urged by the process of industrialization to engage in a fierce competition for survival" [Miao Fuguang, 2007], which inevitably results in the distortion of values and the alienation of human nature. Lawrence metaphorically incorporates his personal insights into the family writing of his story, endowing it with profound ideological connotations.

4.1 *The Distorted Values*

The exposure of money worship is one of the themes of *The Rocking Horse Winner*. "The Industrial Revolution promoted the rapid development of technology, business, and civilization in Britain, while also pushing the spiritual world of the masses into an unprecedented crisis"[Xiao Sha, 2014]. The moral values of the British middle class in the 19th century were deeply influenced by evangelical denominations, and "hard work, frugality, and devotion to duty were all moral norms advocated by evangelicalism"[Xiao Sha, 2014]. In Paul's family, conversely, the worship of money has replaced what had once been moral norms. Their house is haunted by the unspoken voice of money, everyone can hear it. Gradually, the voice of money goes from "whispering" to

“screaming”. Whereupon, expensive new furnishings, beautiful mimosa flowers, almond trees, and iridescent cushions fill the house, “and a blossoming of the luxury Paul’s mother had been used to”. His mother’s greed for money also causes Paul’s greed, to the point where “his big blue eyes blazing with a sort of madness”. Paul’s greed is far less selfish than that of his mother, as he does not want money for himself, and just to help his mother and calm the voices of the family, while Hester’s greed is entirely to make herself appear more wealthy than others. Paul’s uncle is more like a businessman: he approaches Paul after hearing about his “supernatural ability”, tests and uses it in the service of his own wealth. On the evening before Paul’s death, when there is no profit to make, Oscar would not even go near Paul. Needless to say, the relationship between uncle and nephew is also sustained by money worship.

The condemnation of opportunism is another important idea expressed in *The Rocking Horse Winner*. Hester defines luck as “what causes you to have money”, “If you’re lucky you have money. That’s why it’s better to be born lucky than rich. If you’re rich, you may lose your money. But if you’re lucky, you will always get more money.” She tells Paul that one is born lucky or not, and God chooses to make people lucky at random. Hester values luck because she believes that if she were lucky, she would be rich and never have to worry about work or losing her wealth. Hester’s focus on luck rather than work is disastrous for Paul. Paul internalizes his mother’s lesson, associates “luck” with money and discovers that luck can be converted into money in horse betting. He often talks to Bassett about horse betting even before Uncle Oscar finds it. Paul’s mental state fluctuates with the outcome of the horse gambling, and ultimately goes crazy and loses his life. To some extent, Paul’s death is also a tragedy triggered by opportunistic values.

4.2 The Alienation of Human Nature

The Rocking Horse Winner presents a picture of alienated people in an alienated family in the early 20th century Britain. “Lawrence holds a negative attitude towards the entire process of modernization and industrialization in Britain” [Lu Jiande et al., 2021]. With the development of the British bourgeoisie, liberalism replaces mercantilism and gradually becomes the ruling ideology, and the “economic rationality” in the business game enters the families and the society, resulting in the

possession and alienation of human nature by materialism. Erich Fromm, German-born American psychoanalyst and philosopher, perceptively observes that “in modern capitalist society, although the social productivity has been greatly developed and material wealth is no longer scarce, people do not live happily, they are lonely, restless, mechanized, and increasingly separated from themselves, from others, from nature, and they are completely alienated”(Zhang Lu,2009). Fromm combines Karl Marx’s theory of alienation and Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis and puts forward the theory of alienation with the thought of human alienation as the core. Cen Yanmei(2018) argues that Fromm’s theory of human alienation classifies human alienation into the following four categories: alienation in the field of production, alienation in the field of consumption, alienation in interpersonal relations and alienation in the field of unconsciousness. The relationships between mother and son, husband and wife, and uncle and nephew in the story are all damaged by materialism, resulting in alienation. Not only that, in *The Rocking Horse Winner*, the alienation in the field of consumption and the alienation in the field of unconsciousness are likewise expressed remarkably.

The phenomenon of alienation is more prominent in the field of consumption. “Fromm believes that the alienation of human nature in capitalist society cannot be separated from the alienation of the consumption process. Consumption has become a symbol of showing off their wealth and status for people” [Dong Yibo, 2022]. Under the dome of materialism, maternal love is distorted, paternal love is missing, and blood ties become profit chains — Paul is the victim of consumption alienation produced by his family. Paul’s family is in the middle class, and their income is not considerable. Nevertheless, both the father and the mother are expensive in their tastes. In their eyes, money is no longer the currency itself, and purchases are not made for the sake of life—they become their capital to show off and tools to satisfy their vanity. In pursuit of vanity, they lose both the precious love and family ties. Eventually, the family is gone, the humanity is gone, and so is the son. Similarly, Uncle Oscar takes advantage of Paul’s yearning for family affection to satisfy his own ever-expanding vanity, which ultimately catalyzes the family tragedy. In the field of unconsciousness, “If the individual’s opinion conflicts with those of the majority, he will be collectively isolated. Therefore, in order to seek a sense of security, people will actively escape from

freedom, do what everyone else does, and obey the collective will” [Cen Yanmei, 2018]. That Paul’s family always feels “not nearly enough for the social position which they had to keep up” is the direct evidence of the alienation in the field of unconsciousness produced by the family. In an environment where everyone pursues profit, Paul’s family unconsciously loses their ability to judge for themselves, blindly follows the collective will, and involuntarily joins the trend of chasing wealth. *The Rocking Horse Winner* can be said to be Lawrence’s sharp criticism of various alienation phenomena in the process of British modernization.

5. CONCLUSION

The family is the root of personal growth, the cell that makes up society, and the bedrock of national development. Seeing the big world through small one, D.H. Lawrence, through his family writing in *The Rocking Horse Winner*, has vividly unfolded the social landscape in which everyone pursues profit under modern capitalist system, and criticized the destruction of family by materialism and the alienation of human nature by money worship. This is the embodiment of Lawrence’s writing technique and his attempt to save humanity. Following with interest the establishment of family ties and harmonious families, examining the social and family crises arising in the process of modernization, and improving the moral quality of people and the degree of social civilization are the realistic significance of writing family-themed novels today. The family problems touched upon in *The Rocking Horse Winner* still exist in the new era, and expanding the research of the family writing will surely benefit the development of society and mankind.

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