
Buying Love, Losing Childhood: A Study of Materialism and Maternal Neglect in DH Lawrence's *Rocking Horse Winner*

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Abstract:

This paper assesses the psychological turmoil of materialism and emotional neglect on children within the context of the industrial age through a detailed study of D.H. Lawrence's short story *The Rocking Horse Winner*. Written in 1926, this story portrays young Paul, whose desperate attempts to satisfy his mother's limitless greed for wealth and luxuries reveal the detriments of materialism and neglect of children because of societal pressure. The methodology applied in this research is close textual analysis supported by psychoanalytic criticism. With the help of contemporary theories such as attachment theory and self-worth theory, this study examines how Paul's need for his mother's attention and care gets him entwined with the dangerous road to financial success.

This study demonstrates that Paul's obsession with "luck" to get his mother's approval reflects a broader societal pressure of the industrial age, where financial stability, though very hard to achieve, was yet elusive. Lawrence uses Paul's demise to show the negative consequences that arise when children are raised in insecure environments where material and financial success overshadow genuine affection and love.

Keywords: Attachment Theory, *Rocking Horse Winner*, Self Worth Theory, Maternal Neglect, Materialism

Introduction

The Industrial Revolution, marked by widespread industrialization and mass production, is often seen as the peak of materialism. Britain was the first country to achieve large-scale industrialization, which paved the way for extensive social and economic changes. Families were constantly under pressure to maintain material wealth as a result of mass production and the growth of the middle class, notwithstanding the poor pay and deplorable working conditions of the era. Families are dissolving and human interaction is decreasing in this era of pervasive material pursuit of status.

D.H. Lawrence, a Freudian and well-known opponent of industrialism, effectively expresses in his writings his distaste for the careless materialistic pursuits of his period. According to him, materialism has dehumanized society and rendered it meaningless since it has limited opportunities for social, emotional, and personal growth as well as taste. being born during the height of industrialization. His books and short stories reveal his emotional turmoil, which stems from his own family's ongoing arguments over material possessions and status.

The Rocking Horse Winner is a story about young Paul, the protagonist, who is devoid of any emotional fulfilment from his mother and makes many attempts to win over her love through financial success. Throughout the story, we can see the protagonist's constant mental strain due to the lack of connection between him and his mother, which ultimately lands him in a gambling addiction. His unhealthy behaviour with a toy that told him the winners of each horse racing game ultimately led to his tragic demise, and despite trying to prove it for his mother in the end, he dies with love from no one.

Within the story, we can see how emotionally tortured the young kid is when his mother no longer loves him and the voices in the home drive him insane with want for worldly wealth. In addition to analysing the story's relevance in the current era of material abundance and rapid fulfilment, the primary goal of this study is to encourage the use of modern theories to gain a deeper understanding and meaning from the work. Through this style of analysis, the purpose is to understand how industrial values and modern culture can affect children and in this case, be the cause of Paul's demise.

Paul's Material obsession in context of Object Attachment Theory

Materialism is not a very recent discovery; it has existed since the time of the pre-Socratic Greeks, but it has heightened rapidly in recent times. Materialism in today's social context can be said to be how much a person consumes or how significant physical objects are in a person's life and how they tend to revolve their life around them. (Ronald, 2011) The industrial period itself is characterized by a highly capitalist culture, where people consume to maintain their social standing through mass production and capitalism; the populace becomes increasingly disengaged and preoccupied with materialistic endeavors. Almost all social well-being is determined by materialistic items. While it became so accessible, everyone in the industrial society joined the rat race to climb the social ladder by spending on their appearance, possessions, etc. Meanwhile, people were so engrossed in this chase for physical riches that human emotions and relationships started degrading at dangerous rates. This feeling of wanting more and more materials tends to pass on from adults to children, as we see in Paul's story, and it can affect children more adversely than adults.

There are several reasons why children may be attracted to and get attached to material objects, which can be insecurity in self, insecurity in the family, development of a unique identity, for comfort and relief, and also for peer or social recognition. What concerns us in this story is Paul's attachment to money or "luck" for two main reasons: lack of self-worth because of deprived love from family and perceived insecurity rooted in the family

itself. "Developing and maintaining a positive sense of self is critical throughout childhood and is especially challenging during early adolescence, when a child's body and social relationships change in drastic ways." (Richins, 2021). Richins also adds that to maintain this positive self, the child indulges in materialism. Regarding insecure family situations, Richins says that family can be the biggest sense of security and insecurity as well for children. While some children have healthy relationships with their parents, some do not, and this results in feelings of anxiety and insecurity, which in turn make the child resort to objects for security. This resonates highly with Paul's mental turmoil in his own home because of his unhealthy attachment to attaining material wealth and his strained and one-sided relationship with his cold-hearted mother.

A Framework for Maternal Neglect Using Attachment Theory

It is essential to first establish the mother's characterization and her son's responses inside the narrative before applying the Attachment Theory to Paul's behaviour. The opening lines of the story, 'She had bonny children, yet she felt they had been thrust upon her and she could not love them,' reveal the mother's feelings and emotions toward her own children. She feels a great deal of detachment from them and views them as a burden. This sort of strained relationship can have many interpretations and causes, which can be her strained marriage due to lack of financial luxury and the inability of the father to provide a lavish lifestyle for the family. It can also be seen as the mother's projection of her regrets and her constant greed to have more and more money; she sees the kids as heavy expenditures and is feeling cold about having to spend so much for them. Another reason could also be her regret of not being able to succeed and climb the social and monetary hierarchy of the society, which can be seen in the middle of the story where she tries her hand at sketching furs and dress materials but doesn't succeed at that as well. In the light of these interpretations, the mother is also confused, not knowing what her fault could be, as the children can sense the distraught and hardening of heart while they 'looked at her coldly as if they were finding fault with her.' Both the children and the mother are aware of the mother's lack of love for them." "Later in the story, when Paul has a talk with Mother about luck, the mother gets all bitter and sad, and Paul, to cheer her up, says that he is lucky. The mother laughs bitterly and even uses one of his dad's replies. 'The boy saw she did not believe him; or rather, that she paid no attention to his assertion. This angered him somewhat and made him want to compel her attention.' The mother's coldness and the effect it is having on Paul's internal system are very evident here as she clearly ignores him, and Paul is left with an uneasy feeling of needing to get her attention through any means.

Children like Paul had a deep love for their mothers; as a result of this love not being returned, he met a tragic end. This story, when seen in the light of the attachment theory, shows us how the strained relationship between the mother and the child caused mental anguish. In the attachment theory, Bowlby (1969) suggests that children come into the world with an inborn need to form attachments so as to survive. In this process, they form a single main attachment figure different from other attachments, who is their primary caregiver or their mother, and this is called 'monotropy.' Later, Bowlby (1988) suggested that if this monotropic attachment is strained in any way, there would be serious unfavourable and negative

consequences to the child's mental health, and they are mostly irreversible. Assessing the narrative in light of attachment theory gives us another explanation for Paul's psychopathy and demise. His wild rocking of the horse, the anxiety in the house, the whispers—all these instances are, in turn, a mirror reflecting Paul's desperation for and deprivation of his mother's love.

According to the attachment theory by John Bowlby, human life is based on the attachments we make with our primary attachment figure, which is the mother, and with other figures. But mostly the relationship with the primary caregiver is what determines the nature of the child's 'inner working model,' which he defines as the internal system within a child's mind that determines whether the attachments he forms are secure or insecure. A child often needs a secure base that he can lean on while forming other attachments, and when there is a lack of this 'secure base' from his mother, it can lead to distorted and disorganized internal models, which overall affect the behaviour of the child. In this case Paul has a very strained relationship with his mother which can lead to being the reason for his obsessive behaviour of trying to please her. According to Bowlby, children can show two types of insecure attachments, one being insecure ambivalence, in which they do not see themselves as someone that can be loved, and the other as insecure avoidance, in which they have a feeling of not being worthy of care; these behaviours can be seen throughout the story, as at one point we don't see Paul even thinking about anything else other than earning "luck," which is the only way he could compel her attention. He only cared about getting "luck".

The attachment theory also asserts that an insecure base can cause anxiety; it can cause 'confused, chaotic, and bizarre patterns of repetitive actions,' which can be seen in the story very evidently through the voices Paul hears repeatedly, which leads to his obsessive surging on the rocking horse, as for him that is the solution to stop the voices. The whole house is filled with anxiety with the kids hearing voices repeating maddeningly, 'There must be more money! There must be more money!' on multiple occasions in the story. Every time there were new toys, furnishings, or new luxuries in the house, the voices would repeatedly scream, which, as the story progresses, becomes a driving factor for Paul's madness to earn money, which leads to his tragic end. We can find the origin of this haunting phrase in their house from the mother's greed for more money and lack of fulfilment, leading to her and the kid's strained relationship. In the lens of the above-mentioned concepts, these incidents can be linked in the order that due to the mother's lack of fulfilment of money, she is cold to her children, and because of the coldness as well as the greed, an atmosphere of anxiety is created in the house for the children as their base is insecure. This insecure base causes Paul to exhibit strange behaviours as a result of his ongoing attempts to please his mother, which ultimately fail, and his inner turmoil brought on by the neglect.

Self-Worth and The Pursuit of Luck

Paul, within the story, heavily associates the love he can get from his distant mother as an achievement for earning money or, in his mother's words, "luck.". While one source of this deep-rooted association can be seen through Richins (2021) object attachment theory, another explanation can be through Covington's (1984) self-worth theory, which suggests

that children, especially at an early age, tend to associate their worthiness with their perceived abilities and efforts. The main reason for this is that society and, to some extent, caregivers as well, associate self-worth with one's accomplishments. This implies that unless the individual is good at some valued activity, their self-esteem will be at an all-time low, nor can they access any of the personal and social benefits of success. Within the story, Paul keeps associating his ability to foretell the winner of the Derby race with his own self-worth in the sense children usually associate their self-worth with how their primary caregivers treat them.

The whole narrative is driven by luck, first introduced in the conversation between Paul and his mother. This conversation is crucial, as Paul's drive for luck leads to the tragic ending. Paul has a strained relationship with his mother because she is dissatisfied with their financial status and his father's inability to provide luxuries. Her disdain is clear when she speaks to Paul about luck. She tells him that his father is unlucky, and since she married him, she is also unlucky. Her words carry a bitter undertone, which Paul notices.

Paul initially equates luck with money, but his mother corrects him, saying that luck brings money. She asserts that it is better to be born lucky than rich, as money can run out, but luck ensures continuous wealth. This dissatisfaction and bitterness perhaps make Paul realize that luck or money is the only way to win over his mother. His attachment to luck and money can be analysed through Covington and Omelich's self-worth theory, which states that a person's worth is often tied to their abilities and accomplishments. Society places value on success not only for social and personal benefits but also because it confirms one's self-perception.

After this conversation, Paul obsessively rides his rocking horse, believing it will lead him to luck. He succeeds in guessing the winning horses and secretly gifts his mother five thousand pounds through a lawyer with the help of his uncle. However, this does not satisfy her greed for luxury. His mother's coldness toward him drives his pursuit of "luck" through horse races. As he keeps winning, her attitude shifts from indifference to growing concern, reaching its peak when she suddenly becomes anxious about his well-being.

Even as he becomes physically distressed from his frantic rocking, Paul remains obsessed with picking the winning horse. For him, this is the only way to secure his mother's validation. Since she has tied luck to their misfortunes, Paul sees it as his responsibility to reverse their fate. As Covington's theory suggests, Paul equates his self-worth with his ability to be lucky and is willing to risk everything to prove it.

"Malabar! Malabar! Did I say Malabar, mother? Did I say Malabar? Do you think I'm lucky, mother? I knew Malabar, didn't I? Over eighty thousand pounds! I call that lucky, don't you, mother? Over eighty thousand pounds! I knew, didn't I know I knew? Malabar came in all right. If I ride my horse till I'm sure, then I tell you, Bassett, you can go as high as you like. Did you go for all you were worth, Bassett?"(Lawrence,1988)

These lines reaffirm how much Paul associated his worth and the love he could receive from his mother with his ability to guess the winning horse.

Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to analyse *The Rocking Horse Winner* by D.H. Lawrence with the help of contemporary developments and theories in child psychology to better understand Paul's emotional turmoil that led to his demise. This research employs close textual analysis of D.H. Lawrence's *The Rocking-Horse Winner* as its primary source, supported by contemporary psychological frameworks—notably Bowlby's Attachment Theory, Richin's Object Attachment Theory and Covington's Self-Worth Theory. Although readings of Paul's psychology have traditionally been dominated by Freudian interpretations (such as the Oedipal Complex), this study takes a different approach, in order to clarify the relationship between materialism and emotional deprivation in child development. This study uses close reading to analyse Paul's distress, his fixation on money and luck, and the further effects of materialism and neglect on him. Secondary sources and historical context have been used to link the story with the industrial age it was written in and how its societal norms and pressures affect children of that era represented by Paul.

Conclusion

Paul's tragic demise in *The Rocking-Horse Winner* stems from his insecure attachment to his emotionally distant mother, whose materialism creates an atmosphere of neglect. This study has used attachment and self-worth theories to analyse his obsessive pursuit of luck as a means to win her validation. Even as his health fails, Paul continues his desperate quest, illustrating the destructive impact of conditional love. His death serves as both a critique of measuring self-worth through external success and a warning about how parents' unfulfilled desires damage children.

The story reveals how industrial-age values distorted family bonds, repurposing love into transactional exchanges. Lawrence's portrayal transcends its time, showing how societal priorities that value wealth over emotional care force children to internalize harmful hierarchies. By applying a different psychological approach, this analysis uncovers new dimensions in Paul's tragedy—not just as a family drama, but as a systemic critique. The findings confirm literature's power to document the psychological consequences of materialism through the perspective of the childhood experience of the industrial age.

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