

Dawn Graham

Jill Cadwell

English 1022.03

Essay 1

06-08-09

### “The Rocking-Horse Winner” and Symbols of Capitalism

Throughout the written history of storytelling, authors have used the power held within their pens to remark on their own personal viewpoints about many controversial issues. Some writers choose to openly state their opinions while others have cloaked their thoughts within the characters and events of their writings. Such is the case in a piece written by D.H. Lawrence titled “The Rocking-Horse Winner.” Written in an unsettled time in American history, between the first and second World Wars, it is a story about a young boy who unintentionally lives out the most basic aspects of capitalism through his desire to provide for his mother and his family through profits made on the horse racing circuit. Paul, the protagonist of the story, rides a wooden rocking horse in an attempt to ascertain the name of the winning horse for upcoming races which, when discovered, he places bets on and collects substantial amounts of money. This currency is then given to his mother, who spends it as she sees fit and who never seems to have enough to satisfy her needs. Paul then feels the need to ride his horse and repeat the cycle of betting and winning to produce more funds to be forwarded to his mother. This vicious cycle is representative of what Lawrence feels is the capitalist system. Three major tenets of capitalism

itself are illustrated within the pages of this fictional piece through the use of symbols, including the concept of luck, the rocking horse Paul rides, and the portrayal of Paul's mother.

The idea of needing to be lucky to obtain money, which is the main goal of capitalism, is one of the most prevailing ideas in this short story. Paul is told repeatedly that his family is not as wealthy as it could be simply because they are not lucky. According to Simon Baker, "Upset by his mother's unhappiness, and mindful of her belief that that the family is 'unlucky,' he sets out to discover 'luck,' and thereby obtain wealth" (Baker par 3). Paul's mother also contributes to this belief that luck equals money when she tells him, "But if you're lucky, you will always get more money" (Lawrence 2). The young child cannot help but notice the sadness this lack of luck creates. Manifested through the constant need for money, unluckiness permeates his home through the imagined whispers of the house itself crying for more money. Being a sensitive person, Paul decides he will find the luck that will grant him the money needed to combat the depression his loved ones, especially his mother, are experiencing. Capitalism revolves around the monetary system. Everything requires money and, according to Paul's mother, one must be lucky to have the money one needs to survive and flourish. In this way, Lawrence's writing addresses the one of the most important parts of a capitalist society: it takes luck to make money.

The act of working, which is arguably the another extremely important aspect of capitalism, is represented by Paul's riding of his rocking horse to discover the name of the winning horse, which will allow him to make money. The boy would spend hours working on his horse at a time, much in the same fashion that his adult counterparts would spend hours working for their wages. Instead of exchanging a timesheet for a paycheck, he would take the name discovered while riding and place a winning bet. An example of this can be found when, shortly after winning another large bet on a race, Paul states, "I made twelve hundred, didn't I, Bassett?"

(Lawrence 5). Also rather like his more experienced fellows in the workforce, the amount of pressure put on him to be productive in his work ultimately lead to burnout and his premature death. This early departure from the earthly realm clues readers into the fact that, “Lawrence’s conviction was that the price of ‘the plausible ethics of productivity’ was too high” (Coleman 77). In other words, the amount of work expected and the conditions in which that work was performed in that society caused the workers to pay too high of a price for what little they actually obtained. Paul’s only concern was putting in the amount and quality of work that would produce the amount of money that his mother wanted, even if it came at the cost of his own young life.

Paul’s mother, within the confines of this piece, is representative of what could be considered the ruling class of capitalist society. She could be viewed as the same as the business and factory owners who demand so much from their workers. In this light, Paul could be looked at as an employee of his mother, even if she is not aware at first that he is the source of her financial windfalls. The evidence for this can be found on page six where Lawrence writes, “‘Of course,’ said the boy, ‘I started it for mother’” (Lawrence). While Paul does his best to supply the money she so desperately wants, it is never quite enough and she is always asking for more. This is much like what her entrepreneurial cohorts would demand of their employees. Without intending to, she is exploiting her own son. This is often what happens within capitalism. Daniel P. Watkins states, “Labor under capitalism is defined in terms of two principle matters. First, it yields profits in the form of money that can be invested to produce more profits. For this to happen – and this is the second point – exploitation is necessary” (Watkins 296). Young Paul learns that he is being exploited by his mother when his uncle has a conversation regarding a rather large amount of money that he had sent to his mother via an attorney: “He said Paul’s

mother had had a long interview with the lawyer, asking if the whole five thousand could not be advanced at once, as she was in debt” (Lawrence). After agreeing to let her have the entire amount, “There were flowers in the winter, and a blossoming of the luxury Paul’s mother had been used to” (Lawrence 7). Not only had she paid off her existing debt with the money from her son, but she had also incurred new debt to replace the old. This is the same cycle that is replayed constantly in the capitalist society that Lawrence is so negatively commenting on within this story.

The symbolism in this work of fiction serves to relay the author’s personal views on the subject of capitalism. Things such as the idea of luck equating to money, Paul’s rocking horse as a form of work, and his mother as his overseer all explore important pieces of the capitalist pie. If one looks at this concept from the point of D. H. Lawrence, then readers see a picture of capitalism as a system that gains money through the exploitation of its workers, only to reinvest that capital and demand more money to be made. This horrible cycle is portrayed vividly in “The Rocking-Horse Winner,” a story which teaches readers to be happy with what they have because all that they consider important could easily be taken from them unexpectedly.

## Works Cited

Baker, Simon. "The Rocking-Horse Winner: Overview." Reference Guide to Short Fiction. Ed.

Noelle Watson. Detroit: St. James Press, Literature Resource Center. Gale. Century

College Library. White Bear Lake, MN. 29 May 2009

<<http://go.galegroup.com.cenproxy.mnpals.net/>>.

Coleman, Peter. "D.H. Lawrence: genius or joke?." Quadrant. 50.9 (Sept. 2006): 76-79.

Literature Resource Center. Gale. Century College Library. White Bear Lake, MN. 29

May 2009

<<http://go.galegroup.com.cenproxy.mnpals.net/>>.

Lawrence, D.H., "The Rocking-Horse Winner." Dowse Fiction. 1-10. 4 June 2009. 6 June, 2009.

<<http://www.dowsefiction.com/fiction/Lawrence.html>>

Watkins, Daniel P. "Labor and Religion in D.H. Lawrence's 'The Rocking-Horse Winner'."

Studies in Short Fiction 24.3 (Summer87 1987): 295-301. Academic Search Premier.

EBSCO. Century College Library. 29 May 2009

<<http://cenproxy.mnpals.net/>>