

OEDIPAL CONFLICT IN LAWRENCE'S "THE ROCKING-HORSE WINNER"

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Few short stories render as clear a picture of oedipal conflict as does D.H. Lawrence's "The Rocking-Horse Winner." Through the disguise of a handsome, happy family living in a "pleasant house, with a garden"<sup>1</sup> we see a desperate situation, one centering around a son obsessed with his desire to supplant his weak, "luckless" father and satisfy his cold(prohibitive) but domineering(close-binding) mother. Lawrence, characteristically bounteous with erotic images and symbols, presents a drama in which the mother-son relationship dictates, from a psychoanalytical standpoint, the characters' motives and actions. A psychoanalytical discussion of these motives and actions, then, will be the focus of this essay.

Immediately Lawrence introduces the tension and anxiety that pervades the entire work. We meet the mother, a woman "who was beautiful, who started with all the advantages, yet she had no luck. She married for love and the love turned to dust."(p.790) The two key words here are "luck" and "dust." Luck, or rather the lack of it, is the rationalization the mother gives the son to explain why there is not more money in the household. His subsequent realization that money is the via regia to his mother's love becomes his all-consuming passion for living and results in his untimely death. It is clear, however, from the very outset that the nurturing of any love

<sup>1</sup> D.H. Lawrence, The Complete Short Stories (New York: Viking Press, 1961), III, 790. All subsequent references to the story are taken from this collection.



relationship is doomed since, as is suggested by the dust image, the mother is dry.

Equally as early in the story we see the overdetermination of phallic images, thus suggesting the sexual conflict permeating the work. The mother is a woman who "had bonny children, yet she felt they had been thrust upon her, and she could not love them." (p.790) Clearly, the only "feeling" that she has for her children is the memory of the sexual intercourse itself. Yet, she feels guilt since her children "looked at her coldly, as if they were finding fault with her. And hurriedly she felt she must cover up some fault in herself. Yet what it was that she must cover up she never knew." (p.790) Again, the unconscious awareness of her vagina is evident; she feels compelled to conceal that "hard little place that could not feel love, no, not for anybody." (p.790)

Eyes, however, dominate the imagery. There are twenty references to the eyes either of the characters or even of the rocking-horse. As is true in William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying, the eyes reflect the identity of the characters in "The Rocking-Horse Winner." Unquestionably, the majority (fourteen) of eye images are those of the boy. They reflect, first, his "unsure" feeling as to his mother's reason for being luckless. Then, upon hearing his mother emasculate his father ("I used to think I was, before I married. Now I think I am very unlucky

*As they do in most of Lawrence's*



indeed." p.792), he "went off by himself, vaguely, in a childish way, seeking for the clue to 'luck'...he would sit on his big rocking-horse...with a frenzy....Wildly the horse careered, the waving dark hair of the boy tossed, his eyes had a strange glare in them." (pp.792-3). His fire lit, the boy's eyes remain "flaring" (p.793) and "hot" (p.795) until he has totally exhausted himself with his wild riding and collapses, never to regain consciousness, his eyes now likened to "blue stones." (p.804)

The horse, clearly another phallic symbol, sheds more light on the continuing pattern of the boy's (Paul) sexual anxiety. According to Dr. Charles Brenner, psychoanalyst and lecturer, Paul's wild rides would fit perfectly into his oedipal dilemma;

There is at least one other important aspect of the oedipal phase...that should not be passed over. That is the genital masturbation which ordinarily constitutes the child's sexual activity during this period of its life. Both the masturbatory activity and the fantasies which accompany it substitute in great part for the direct expression of the sexual and aggressive impulses which the child feels toward his parents. Whether this substitution of autoerotic stimulation and fantasy for real actions toward real people is in the long run more beneficial or more harmful to the child depends in part on what value standards one chooses to adopt....The substitution is inevitable, because in the last analysis it is forced on the child by his biological immaturity.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Charles Brenner, An Elementary Textbook of Psychoanalysis (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1974), p.111.



Obviously, in Paul's situation it is harmful. Normal sexual substitution becomes violent, even cruel, domination. The boy procures a whip to "slash the horse on the neck....He knew the horse could take him to where there was luck, if only he forced it. So he would mount again and start on his furious ride, hoping at last to get there."(p.793)

"Getting there," as the story reveals, means picking the winners of the major horse races, and, by wagering, making a fortune(eighty thousand pounds) for his mother. The characters Bassett(the gardener) and Uncle Oscar(Oscar Cresswell) deserve their introduction here since they provide a substitute for a father who is virtually nonexistent in the story. Just as significant as the father's remaining nameless is Lawrence's choice of name for these two characters. We again see blatantly phallic images. A "basset" is an outcropping of rock, or, in other words, a jutting out of a hard surface. "Oscar," derived from Old English, means literally "a god(ōs) and a spear(gār)." Of course, it also is the golden statue(a man both rigid and erect) given for outstanding achievement in a motion picture. A "cress" is a plant bearing leaves used as a garnish or decoration in a salad. "Cresswell," then, suggests being able to bear many leaves, or, that is, able to produce. Thus the two surrogate fathers, Bassett, because he teaches horse racing to Paul, and Uncle Oscar, because he has money and therefore is

Fortuitous  
co-incidence



"lucky," are allowed into Paul's secret partnership, his private <sup>obsession</sup> to be what his real father is not.

Interestingly, as the character of Paul becomes more and more dominant in the story, his two sisters, like the father, become less important. Besides being dramatically practical; that is, taking away the spotlight from less important characters, this contrast suggests a similar disparity in role acceptance. The two girls have their dolls and their doll's house; in fact, all they do in the story is play quietly off in the distance. There is, however, one rather perplexing situation involving the ages of the children. Joan, supposedly Paul's "elder sister," (p.793) remonstrating to the family nurse that her brother spends too much time on the rocking-horse, says "He's always riding like that! I wish he'd leave off!" (p.793) Yet, near the end of the story, the Derby, the biggest race of all, is approaching, and Paul's mother, at a party, has "one of her rushes of anxiety about her boy, her first-born." (p.802) Who, then, is the oldest child? Being human, Lawrence could have made a simple mistake, and since this question yields no new understanding or interpretation of the story, it is offered here only as a little morsel for thought.

Considerably more important, however, in revealing the mother's influence on Paul is the "unspoken phrase: There must be more money!" (p.791) It, like much of the story's images

*To never  
work  
that  
before.*



and symbols, is overdetermined, occurring first at this very early juncture and growing in intensity thereafter. Indeed, the power of this, the mother's wish, is so great as to manifest itself in a supposedly unspoken whisper that, nevertheless, is able to haunt the family's house with its constant presence. Paul, of course, is the most affected. Similar to the protagonist in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," (who "hears" the heartbeat of his murder victim), Paul drives himself quite mad with anxiety. He confesses to Uncle Oscar "I started it for mother. She said she had no luck, because father is unlucky, so I thought if I was lucky, it might stop whispering." (p.798) Naturally, being curious, Uncle Oscar asks him what is whispering, and Paul tells him it is the house. However, when the uncle asks what the house whispers, Paul "fidgets" and stammers "Why-why-why, I don't know. But it's always short of money, you know, uncle." (p.798) At this juncture in the story the "unspoken phrase" has become more than an unconscious motive; it detaches Paul from reality, rendering him "wild-eyed and strange, as if something were going to explode in him." (p.800) Unfortunately for Paul, something indeed does.

The "explosion" occurs at the "climax" of "The Rocking-Horse Winner," and never could two words be in a more proper context. The scene in which the mother returns from the party, only to find Paul in his most furious (and last) ride, simply



drips with the phallic and masturbatory imagery evident throughout the story. She is tense ("arrested muscles") as she approaches his bedroom and hears a "strange, heavy, and yet not loud noise....It was a soundless noise, yet rushing and powerful. Something huge, in violent, hushed motion."(p.803) As blatantly erotic as the imagery is here at the door of the room, it reaches its height as she enters and sees "The room was dark. Yet in the space near the window, she heard and saw something plunging to and fro....Then suddenly she switched on the light, and saw her son, in his green pyjamas, madly surging on the rocking-horse. The blaze of light suddenly lit him up, as he urged the wooden horse, and lit her up, as she stood...."(p.803) Through his final burst of energy he produces the name of the horse (Malabar) that will win the Derby. Having provided the means to win the big fortune for his mother, he has accomplished all that is important to his life, and "His eyes blazed at her for one strange and senseless second, as he ceased urging his wooden horse. Then he fell with a crash to the ground, and she, all her tormented motherhood flooding upon her, rushed to gather him up."(p.803) Now, too late, she is flooded with motherhood that, up to this horrifying death scene, had been as dry as the symbolic dust of all their loveless lives.



But, in the final analysis, it is Paul's life, not his death, that is most horrifying, and "The Rocking-Horse Winner" is truly a horror story. We see a young boy's double bind situation of trying to assume the manhood he simply can not have and trying to win the love of a mother who has no love to give. Paul's behavior would be, according to Brenner, a "self-imposed, desperate attempt to win love from his surroundings rather than to continue to suffer the unpleasure of being in violent conflict with them."<sup>3</sup> Brenner then raises the question of whether this is good or bad for the child. The answer concerning Paul is simple; it is fatal.

(A)  
 Excellent work. Outstanding  
 material. You might take a look at Selma  
 Fraiberg's analysis in A Study of the Child 9/1954  
 Sorry for the paucity of  
 comments. Time passes.  
 Bob Kline

<sup>3</sup>Brenner, p.182.



## Bibliography

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