

The silence that money cannot buy: materialism, affective alienation, and the critique of industrial capitalism in D. H. Lawrence's "The Rocking-Horse Winner"

An interdisciplinary reading through Marxist cultural theory, affect theory, and the sociology of consumer capitalism

¹Chander Mohan

¹Associate Professor of English

¹Department of English

¹Government Degree College Majalta, Majalta, India

Abstract—D. H. Lawrence's short story "The Rocking-Horse Winner" (1926) constitutes one of the most penetrating critiques of industrial capitalism and its corrosive effects on intimate human relationships to emerge from the modernist period. Set within an anxious middle-class English household consumed by aspirations of wealth and social standing, the narrative traces how material desire systematically displaces emotional bonds, transforming family members into casualties of their own acquisitive compulsions. This article offers a sustained interdisciplinary analysis drawing on Marxist cultural theory, psychoanalytic criticism, affect theory, and the sociology of consumer capitalism. It argues that Lawrence deploys the tragic figure of Paul not simply to illustrate the dangers of greed but to anatomise the structural mechanisms through which capitalist ideology colonises private life, distorts subjectivity, and forecloses the possibility of authentic human relationship. Through close textual reading of the story's principal symbols the whispering house, the rocking horse, and the emotionally sterile figure of Hester the article demonstrates how Lawrence renders ideology tangible, affective, and catastrophically embodied. The analysis engages with the theoretical frameworks of Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Sara Ahmed to illuminate the story's treatment of commodity fetishism, the psychic costs of positional consumption, and what the article terms the affective economy of lack. The story's central insights retain urgent relevance in an era of accelerating consumer culture and deepening affective crisis.

Index Terms—D. H. Lawrence, materialism, capitalism, industrial modernity, alienation, affect theory, family relationships, consumer culture, commodity fetishism, psychoanalysis

I. Introduction

D. H. Lawrence occupies a singular and irreducible position in twentieth-century English literature, distinguished above all by his sustained and philosophically searching critique of industrial modernity and its consequences for human consciousness and embodied experience. Writing during a period of rapid industrial expansion, global financial restructuring, and far-reaching social transformation, Lawrence bore intimate witness to the progressive displacement of communal and affective values by the mechanised, market-driven modes of existence that industrial capitalism was consolidating across the social body. His fiction, essays, letters, and criticism return insistently and with mounting urgency to the psychological costs exacted by a civilisation that had privileged economic accumulation over emotional authenticity and financial calculation over genuine human relationship.

"The Rocking-Horse Winner" (1926) stands as one of his most formally concentrated and intellectually arresting explorations of the destructive power of materialism. First published in Lady Cynthia Asquith's anthology *The Ghost Book*, the story portrays a middle-class English family ensnared in a cycle of financial anxiety despite possessing considerable social privilege. At its centre stands Paul, a young boy who becomes fatally obsessed with acquiring money in an effort to win his mother's affection and silence the spectral demand for wealth that pervades the household. Lawrence renders this domestic tragedy with the heightened, estranging intensity of a fairy tale, a generic register that simultaneously distances the reader from the social norms the story depicts and allows it to illuminate them with peculiar, almost surgical clarity.

Scholarship on the story has advanced readings from psychoanalytic, mythological, feminist, Marxist, and New Historicist perspectives. Psychoanalytic approaches, inaugurated by F. R. Leavis [1] and extended by subsequent critics, have centred on Paul's compulsive riding as a figure of repressed Oedipal desire. Socio-cultural approaches foreground Lawrence's critique of capitalist values and the pathologies generated by consumerist aspiration. More recent interventions have brought affect theory and the sociology of emotion to bear on the text's representation of maternal coldness and domestic emotional labour [2], [3]. The present article consolidates and advances these directions by offering a comprehensive interdisciplinary reading that situates the story's psychological, symbolic, and moral dimensions within a theoretically rigorous account of industrial capitalist culture.

The article proceeds through nine further sections. Following an account of Lawrence's intellectual relationship to industrial modernity, it examines Hester as ideological type; analyses the whispering house as an articulation of capitalist desire; explores Paul's fate as allegory; reads the rocking horse as a multi-layered figure of modern existence; and concludes with an assessment of the story's contemporary relevance.

II. LAWRENCE, INDUSTRIAL MODERNITY, AND THE CRISIS OF HUMAN VALUES

Lawrence's dissatisfaction with industrial civilisation is not incidental to his literary project but constitutive of it. Having grown up in the Nottinghamshire mining community of Eastwood, he observed at close quarters the social and psychological transformations wrought by industrial capitalism: the subordination of natural rhythms to mechanised production, the reduction of human beings to interchangeable units of economic output, and the progressive attenuation of the affective bonds that had once sustained communal life.

Raymond Williams [4], in his account of the tradition of industrial cultural criticism, identifies Lawrence as one of its most significant inheritors. This characterisation requires qualification: Lawrence's critique is not simply romantic primitivism but a structural analysis of how industrial capitalism reorganises consciousness, desire, and affective life in ways that make authentic human connection systematically more difficult. In this respect, his work anticipates the theoretical concerns of the Frankfurt School, particularly Adorno and Horkheimer's account in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* of how instrumental reason progressively colonises the domains of culture, feeling, and intimate life [5].

Terry Eagleton [6] argues that literature achieves its most significant critical function not through the explicit propagation of ideological positions but through formal and aesthetic operations that make the contradictions of social life newly legible. "The Rocking-Horse Winner" exemplifies this principle. Lawrence does not directly represent factories or wage relations; he represents instead their effects upon the psychic interior of the middle-class home, making visible the extent to which industrial capitalism has penetrated even those domains of private life that present themselves as most emphatically removed from the market.

Graham Holderness [7] observes that the domestic space in Lawrence's work is repeatedly revealed to be a site of ideological inscription rather than affective refuge. The story's genius is to render this reproduction not as an abstract analytical proposition but as an immediate, felt, and ultimately lethal reality.

III. HESTER AND THE AFFECTIVE ECONOMY OF LACK

Lawrence's portrayal of Hester, Paul's mother, constitutes the psychological and ideological centre of the narrative. The opening paragraphs establish her as a figure of paradox: beautiful, well-connected, socially advantaged, and yet profoundly and irremediably unhappy. The narrator's diagnosis is delivered with characteristic Lawrentian directness: although she appears affectionate in her social conduct, "there was [in her heart] a hard little place that could not feel love" [8, p. 182]. This emotional incapacity is not a private psychological quirk; it is a condition produced, sustained, and reproduced by the values of the world she inhabits.

Hester's characteristic explanation for her family's unhappiness is philosophically significant: she attributes it to bad luck, and equates luck explicitly and unreflectively with money. By translating an emotional deficit into an economic category, Hester demonstrates the extent to which capitalist ideology has shaped not merely her surface behaviour but her deepest capacity for self-understanding. She mistakes a failure of love for a failure of finance, and this constitutive misrecognition ensures that her pursuit of remedies, always financial rather than affective, can never address the actual source of her suffering. This is what Jameson [9], drawing on Althusser, would call the political unconscious of the bourgeois subject: the systematic displacement of social and structural determinations onto the terrain of individual character and personal fortune.

Sara Ahmed's work on the cultural politics of emotion is illuminating here. Ahmed [2] argues that emotions are not simply interior psychological states but social and cultural practices that orient subjects toward certain objects, values, and attachments and away from others. Hester's emotional coldness is an orientation produced by her immersion in a social world that has systematically devalued affective labour while over-valuing the accumulation of capital and status. The consequences for the children are devastating: Paul and his sisters "read in each other's eyes" the anxiety that their mother cannot acknowledge [8, p. 183]. Paul's desire to become "lucky" is, at its deepest level, a desire for maternal recognition and love, filtered through the only evaluative vocabulary his social environment has made available.

This connects the story to what John Worthen [10] describes as "the death of feeling" in modern life: not dramatic violence but the quiet, progressive extinction of emotional vitality under the pressure of social conformity and economic calculation. Lawrence's portrayal also anticipates what Arlie Hochschild [3] would later theorise as emotional labour: the management, performance, and commodification of feeling. Hester performs the gestures of maternal affection without the feeling that should animate them. Her love has been commodified, reduced to a set of performative behaviours that simulate affective relation while the actual capacity for such relation has been foreclosed.

IV. THE WHISPERING HOUSE: IDEOLOGY, DESIRE, AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF WANT

Among the story's most formally inventive achievements is the motif of the whispering house: the recurring quasi-supernatural murmur, "There must be more money! There must be more money!" that only the children can hear but that pervades the domestic space with increasing insistence [8, p. 183]. This device operates simultaneously on the registers of psychological realism, gothic allegory, and ideological critique. On a psychological level, the whisper externalises the anxiety that Hester cannot acknowledge and that consequently circulates through the household atmosphere as ambient pressure. The children perceive it not as their mother's private anguish but as a property of the physical environment itself: of the Christmas toys, the rustling silk dresses, the very walls. This mode of transmission is precisely how ideology operates: not as an explicit programme that can be consciously accepted or rejected, but as the self-evident, pre-reflective conditions of ordinary lived experience. Lawrence gives ideological naturalisation a sound and in doing so renders the invisible legible.

Louis Althusser's [11] account of ideology as the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence is relevant here, though Lawrence arrives at analogous insights through literary rather than theoretical means. Lawrence's whispering house literalises the process of interpellation: the domestic space

that should be the site of natural affection reveals itself to be a mechanism of ideological reproduction, a structure that calls its inhabitants into the subject-positions of acquisitive desire and competitive status anxiety.

What is theoretically most significant is the house's response to Paul's gambling success. When Paul transmits five thousand pounds to Hester, she deploys the money in ways that amplify rather than satisfy her desire. The whisper, rather than being stilled, grows louder and more frantic: "the voices in the house suddenly went mad" [8, p. 192]. This narrative movement encodes Lawrence's most fundamental economic insight: within the logic of capitalist desire, the temporary satisfaction of one want generates another with increased urgency in an endless and self-perpetuating cycle. This dynamic anticipates what social scientists have theorised as the hedonic treadmill [12]: the tendency for rising expectations to outpace rising satisfactions. But Lawrence's insight is more radical: capitalist desire is constitutively self-defeating, organised not around the possibility of satisfaction but around its systematic postponement.

V. PAUL, THE SACRIFICED CHILD, AND THE TRAGEDY OF MISDIRECTED LOVE

Paul's position in the narrative is that of a figure simultaneously constituted by and offered up to the culture of materialism. His initial motivations are not acquisitive but affective: he wishes to help his mother, to make her happy, to demonstrate that the family is lucky, to silence the whisper his child's sensitivity has registered. The tragedy lies in the fact that his emotional generosity has been channelled, by the social environment in which he has grown up, into forms that can only destroy him.

Lawrence does not present Paul as corrupted in any conventional moral sense. He is a child whose love has been systematically misdirected by a world that offers no adequate language for love except the language of money. The story shows, with the clarity of a case study, how an entirely loving impulse can become lethal when forced to express itself through the only evaluative categories a materialist culture makes available. Paul does not choose to die for money; he chooses to love his mother. The money is the only idiom in which that love can be expressed, and it kills him.

The progressive intensification of Paul's riding constitutes one of the story's most formally controlled sequences. His frenetic activity, conducted in secret, in states of altered consciousness that alarm observers, figures with remarkable economy the psychological pressure exerted upon him by the household's ambient anxiety. Keith Sagar [13] observes that the rocking horse condenses a complex of meanings that resist reduction to any single interpretive frame. At its psychoanalytic core, Paul's riding has been read as a displacement of erotic energy, an Oedipal drama in which the son attempts to satisfy the mother through a grotesque parody of adult masculine achievement. Yet this reading needs to be held in tension with the socio-cultural reading: Paul's compulsion is simultaneously Oedipal and ideological, simultaneously a private drama of thwarted love and a public symptom of a social formation that has conflated masculine achievement with financial success.

The physical consequences, Paul's increasing pallor, his troubled luminous eyes, his progressive withdrawal from ordinary social reality, his final catastrophic collapse, constitute Lawrence's most direct statement of his theme. The boy does not die of illness in any merely medical sense; he dies of the impossible demand placed upon him by a social formation that has confused economic performance with human value. His death is, in the fullest sense of the term, sacrificial: the offering of a child's life to the god of accumulation that the household has erected.

VI. THE ROCKING HORSE: MOTION WITHOUT PROGRESS AND THE ILLUSIONS OF CONSUMER CULTURE

As the story's presiding and most formally complex symbol, the rocking horse demands sustained analysis beyond its immediate narrative function. Lawrence's symbolism is constitutive of meaning in ways that resist paraphrase and the horse operates at no fewer than four distinct symbolic registers.

First and most immediately, the horse figures the fundamental condition of capitalist desire: motion without progress, expenditure without advance, ceaseless activity in the service of a horizon of satisfaction that remains perpetually out of reach. The horse moves emphatically, repeatedly, with increasing urgency; but it goes nowhere. This is not incidental to its symbolism; it is its meaning.

Second, there is a quality of mechanisation in Paul's riding that connects the symbol directly to Lawrence's critique of industrial dehumanisation. The frenetic, rhythmic, compulsive activity, described in terms that emphasise its almost automatised, machine-like character, recalls the repetitive labour of the factory floor transposed into the domestic interior. Paul becomes, in these scenes, something less than fully human: a mechanism driven by imperatives he has not chosen and cannot ultimately survive.

Third, the rocking horse is a figure of illusion. It resembles a real horse but is incapable of genuine movement; it simulates vitality while being essentially inert; it offers the appearance of transport while delivering only stasis. This illusory quality makes it a precise and resonant metaphor for the promises of consumer culture more broadly. The suggestion that the next acquisition will finally deliver the happiness that all previous acquisitions have failed to provide is structurally analogous to the rocking horse's promise of movement: it appears plausible, it is endlessly repeated, and it is constitutively false. Lawrence's choice of a child's toy as the story's central symbol is significant: consumer capitalism is organised around the perpetuation of a fundamentally infantile fantasy.

Fourth, the rocking horse figures the relationship between desire and death that runs through the story's symbolic architecture. The horse carries Paul toward revelation but each revelation intensifies rather than satisfies his compulsion, and the cumulative weight of these revelations ultimately kills him. Jameson's [9] account of the libidinal apparatus of late capitalism, the way in which consumer culture recruits the energies of desire and redirects them toward the reproduction of capital, finds a precise and prophetic literary expression in Lawrence's central symbol.

VII. THE COMMODIFICATION OF FEELING AND THE POLITICS OF DOMESTIC EMOTION

The story's treatment of maternal love invites reading through the lens of what Ahmed [2] calls the affective economy: the circulation of feeling within social formations in ways that are structured, directional, and productive of particular social relations and hierarchies. What Hester's household demonstrates is the operation of what we might term an affective economy of lack: a social formation in which the authentic goods of emotional life, love, recognition, connection, care, are systematically devalued and displaced by the pseudo-goods of consumer culture, with the result that the household is simultaneously over-supplied with the latter and starved of the former.

This commodification of feeling is not, Lawrence insists, a function of individual pathology but of social structure. Hester does not choose to withhold her love; she has lost, or perhaps never possessed, the affective capacity that genuine maternal love requires, because the social world she inhabits offers no support for, and indeed actively militates against, the cultivation of such capacity.

Paul's attempt to purchase his mother's love is structurally inevitable. He has internalised the household's affective economy so completely that he can conceive of no other means of seeking the recognition he needs. His rocking horse rides are, in a quite precise sense, emotional labour [3]: exhausting, compulsive, conducted in secret, and directed entirely toward the satisfaction of another's need at the cost of his own survival. The story is, among other things, a meditation on the gendered and generational distribution of emotional labour within the bourgeois family, a distribution in which the child bears a disproportionate and ultimately unsustainable burden.

VIII. STRUCTURAL IRONY, TRAGIC FORM, AND LAWRENCE'S MORAL VISION

The concluding movement of "The Rocking-Horse Winner" is organised around a structural irony that constitutes Lawrence's sharpest and most formally precise critical statement. Paul succeeds, entirely, at the cost of his life, in furnishing his mother with a substantial fortune. He obtains precisely what he set out to obtain. Yet his success changes nothing of what mattered. Hester's capacity for love is not unlocked by the possession of eighty thousand pounds; the whisper is not silenced; the family's fundamental emotional destitution is not remedied by its financial enrichment.

The structural irony is the formal expression of Lawrence's central argument. If the story's implicit ideological premises were correct, if money could genuinely produce the happiness that Hester and her household desire, Paul's sacrifice would not be in vain. The fact that it is absolutely, unambiguously, and irreversibly in vain is Lawrence's narrative demonstration that those premises are false. Material wealth is constitutively incapable of serving as a foundation for human flourishing. This is not a contingent empirical finding but a structural necessity: the same logic that generates the desire for more money generates the desire for still more money in response to any given acquisition.

Lawrence's moral vision is notable for its refusal of easy condemnation. Hester is not a villain; she is a victim, perhaps the most fully realised victim in the story, of the same ideological formation that destroys Paul. She has genuinely lost the capacity to know what she lacks, because the social world she inhabits has so thoroughly organised her perceptions and evaluative vocabulary around economic categories that no alternative framework is available to her. Lawrence's critique is, in the deepest sense, systemic rather than moralistic, directed not at individuals who make wrong choices but at a social order that has structurally foreclosed the conditions for making right ones.

IX. CONSUMER CAPITALISM AND THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF LAWRENCE'S CRITIQUE

"The Rocking-Horse Winner" was written in 1926, in the shadow of the Great War and on the threshold of the Depression. Nearly a century later, the social and economic formations Lawrence analyses have not merely persisted but intensified, achieving a global reach and a degree of cultural penetration that would have exceeded even his pessimistic projections.

Consumer capitalism continues to propagate the conviction that happiness is achievable through material acquisition. The measurement of personal worth by economic success has intensified in the decades since Lawrence wrote, extending from the domains of business and social life into education, healthcare, personal relationships, and the intimate spaces of family and childhood. The whisper of the house has become the roar of the global market.

The story's treatment of childhood is particularly resonant in this context. Paul is not simply a victim of his mother's emotional unavailability; he is a child recruited into the economic system as a producer at the cost of his own life. The story also speaks with surprising directness to contemporary debates about mental health and the psychological costs of economic precarity and aspiration. The anxiety that pervades Hester's household, the constant ambient pressure of financial inadequacy relative to social aspiration, is a recognisable feature of middle-class life in advanced capitalist societies, and its effects upon children's emotional development have been extensively documented [14]. Lawrence's rendering of this anxiety through the device of the whispering house is a precise phenomenological description of a social-psychological condition that has become more prevalent in the century since he named it.

X. CONCLUSION

"The Rocking-Horse Winner" remains one of D. H. Lawrence's most formally accomplished, thematically concentrated, and philosophically significant works. Through the tragic fate of Paul and the

carefully calibrated characterisation of Hester and her whisper-haunted household, Lawrence exposes the psychological and affective consequences of a social order governed by economic values: the systematic displacement of authentic human connection by the compulsions of material desire, the progressive colonisation of domestic space and intimate life by the logic of capital, and the ultimately lethal consequences of a social formation that recruits the energies of love in the service of accumulation.

A full understanding of the story requires engagement with multiple critical frameworks: the socio-cultural critique that Lawrence himself explicitly pursues; the psychoanalytic dimensions that his symbolic register invites; and the theoretical frameworks of affect theory, ideology critique, and the sociology of consumer culture that allow his intuitions to be elaborated and extended. No single framework is adequate to the story's complexity; its achievement lies precisely in its capacity to sustain and reward readings at each of these levels while maintaining a narrative coherence and an emotional immediacy that make it accessible to readers who approach it without theoretical preparation.

The story's enduring significance lies in its engagement with questions that time has made more rather than less urgent. Its central insight, that a social formation organised around the endless stimulation and temporary satisfaction of material desire is constitutively incompatible with the conditions necessary for authentic human flourishing, is a structural diagnosis, rendered in the form of art, of a logic that continues to organise social life in the twenty-first century with consequences visible in epidemic rates of anxiety, depression, and loneliness.

"The Rocking-Horse Winner" ultimately affirms, through the negative evidence of its tragedy, Lawrence's deepest conviction: that authentic human relationships constitute the irreplaceable foundation of a meaningful life, that love cannot be purchased or performed, and that no accumulation of money, however vast, however heroically obtained, can substitute for the simple and devastating capacity to feel.

XI. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author declares no external funding for this research. The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive and generous engagement with earlier drafts of this article.

References

- [1] F. R. Leavis, D. H. Lawrence: Novelist. London: Chatto and Windus, 1955.
- [2] S. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
- [3] A. R. Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.
- [4] R. Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.
- [5] T. W. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, E. Jephcott, Trans. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. (Original work published 1944.)
- [6] T. Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*. London: New Left Books, 1976.
- [7] G. Holderness, D. H. Lawrence: History, Ideology and Fiction. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982.
- [8] D. H. Lawrence, "The rocking-horse winner," in *The Complete Short Stories*, pp. 181-198. London: Penguin Classics, 2007. (Original work published 1926.)
- [9] F. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.
- [10] J. Worthen, D. H. Lawrence: The Life of an Outsider. London: Penguin Books, 2005.

- [11] L. Althusser, "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, B. Brewster, Trans., pp. 127-186. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.
- [12] P. Brickman and D. T. Campbell, "Hedonic relativism and planning the good society," in *Adaptation-Level Theory: A Symposium*, M. H. Apley, Ed., pp. 287-302. New York: Academic Press, 1971.
- [13] K. Sagar, *The Art of D. H. Lawrence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966.
- [14] J. M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy*. New York: Atria Books, 2017.
- [15] M. Kinkead-Weekes, *D. H. Lawrence: Triumph to Exile 1912-1922*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.