



The Rocking-Horse Winner: The Discontents of Human Relations

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Abstract

This paper discusses, from a psychological perspective supplied by Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the problem of unhappiness in human relationships as depicted in D.H. Lawrence's *The Rocking-Horse Winner*. Within the framework of modern civilization, Lawrence's short story is a tragic tale underscoring emotional alienation, disintegration of families, and the vicious consequences of materialism all these confirming Freud's concept of inherent human discontent. This dissertation relates Freud's ideas on repression, guilt, neuroses, and the opposing instincts of life and death to Lawrence's depiction of misery in human relationships through an examination of emotional and psychic flows motivating the characters, especially Paul and his mother Hester. Through a close reading of both Lawrence's narrative and Freud's philosophical and psychoanalytic arguments, this research underlines the powerful and destructive role played by social convention on personal happiness and family relationships.

Keywords: Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, D. H. Lawrence, The Rocking-Horse Winner, neurosis, repression, materialism, Oedipal complex, death instinct

Introduction

D.H. Lawrence's *The Rocking-Horse Winner* is a story of tragedy that epitomizes the breakdown in the emotional connectivities within an overly materialistic family, their emotional neglect, and relentless pursuit for wealth. Discontent arising from this pursuit between Paul and his mother, Hester, is really at the heart of the whole storyline. As the story unfolds, one can trace how the obsession of Paul with good fortune and his mother's unending desire for more and more material possessions contribute to the family's utter disintegration on all emotional and psychological levels. This sense of dissatisfaction, however, is not unique to Lawrence's work but has close connections with Sigmund Freud's insights in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Freud's work reaches for the causes of human discontent, envisioning that the way civilization requires us to repress instinctive desires and reconcile ourselves in cultural values brings an inner conflict and neuroses.

In *The Rocking-Horse Winner*, we see this theory of Freud's in action, precisely in the ways that human relations are distorted through societal pressures for material success into a deep sense of alienation and emotional void. This paper undertakes an analysis of Lawrence's characters from a psychological perspective using Freud's concepts of repression, guilt, and the life and death instincts, Eros and Thanatos. It further illustrates how the story in itself is a mirror of the larger discontent-which which Freud saw as inevitable in modern civilization, where economic pressures and emotional repression, all originating within the nucleus of family structure, lead to a breakdown in human relationships.



Literature Review

Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* provides a very striking framework through which to analyze the human relations in Lawrence's story. Freud's central thesis is that civilization, in trying to maintain order, places restrictions on human instincts—most notably those of aggression and sexuality. These inhibiting tendencies create internal conflict within an individual due to their longing for desires, now inhibited because of societal adherence. As it is with Freud, he notes, "Civilization demands sacrifices from individuals, particularly in terms of instinctual gratification, and in return, it offers protection and stability. But this bargain is ultimately unsatisfying, as the suppression of instincts leads to deep-seated dissatisfaction and neurosis" (Freud, p. 45). In *The Rocking-Horse Winner*, Hester comes to embody this dissatisfaction. She is emotionally sterile, though successful and secure outwardly, and her craze for wealth is but the projection of this deeper dissatisfaction with life.

Several scholars have committed Lawrence's critique of modern society, which has become consumed with materialism. In a written work by Mark Kinkead-Weekes in 1962, he mentioned that Lawrence's works have always tended to demonstrate the "tragic consequences of a society ruled by greed and inauthentic desires." Similarly, Kinkead-Weekes maintains that, in *The Rocking-Horse Winner*, one is presented with precisely how the merciless pursuit of material wealth can be ruinous to family relationships, particularly between Paul and his mother, which is characterized by emotional alienation and neglect. Similarly, Terry Eagleton draws on Freudian psychoanalysis in Lawrence's work by making the contention that the story fully illustrates Freud's "pleasure principle" and "reality principle," two theories used to define the tension between an individual's desires for immediate satisfaction and societal pressures to conform to the long term goals of stability and order.

The dynamics of Paul's relationship with his mother ring out to Freud's Oedipal complex: after all, in this need for his mother's love and approbation lies the central core of the story. In short, it is through the family structure, or more specifically through those people who are raising them, that most of children's intensive emotional conflicts for Freud are experienced. As Freud elaborates, "the child's first emotional attachments are to its parents, and these attachments play a crucial role in shaping its later emotional development" (Freud, p. 40). For Paul, however, in the case of this mother, her materialistic frigidity provides the basis for his neurotic behavior in that he tries desperate to please her by becoming "lucky." His rides on the rocking horse, in which he discovers the names of the winners of horse races, are symbolic of his attempts at exercising mastery over his environment but also disclose the compulsions and anxieties that Freud associates with unresolved psychosexual conflict.

Carol Siegel's psychoanalytic reading of Lawrence's short stories argues that Paul's rocking-horse rides are a sort of sublimation, a key Freudian concept referring to when unacceptable desires are channeled into socially acceptable actions. In Paul's case, his desire for his mother's affection is sublimated into his obsessively desperate need to win money through gambling. Yet, as Freud points out, sublimation is not essentially happiness or emotional fulfillment. It often creates further discontent since the main drives of an individual remain unsatisfied. According to Siegel, Paul's tragic end underscores the futility of his efforts to balance instinctual needs with demands from his family and society.



Freudian Analysis of *The Rocking-Horse Winner*

Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* is based on the fact that civilization requires the individual to repress his instinctive desires for the sake of social harmony. For Freud, repression creates inner conflict since the individual has been torn between the urge of natural desires and the constrictions imposed by society. He writes, "The essence of civilization consists in the fact that the members of a community have in it common renounce the satisfaction of certain instincts so that this community should make possible a life free from customs and laws. For the individual this renunciation means a sacrifice of instinct gratification and (Freud, p. 50). Hence, a source of unhappiness". In *The Rocking-Horse Winner*, this struggle can be seen between Paul and his mother, Hester. Hester does not feel frustrated with life simply because of the financial status in which she finds herself; rather, it stems from deeper emotional dissatisfaction. She is portrayed as one "who could not feel love" (Lawrence, p. 2) for whom the attainment of wealth may serve as a substitute to get her emotional fulfillment. Her coldness towards her children, most especially Paul, reflects Freud's ideas that society forbids the expression of emotional needs as it has given more emphasis on other forms of attainment, such as economic success.

Paul internalizes his mother's emotional frigidity and becomes fixated on the idea of "luck." He believes that through gaining money, he will be able to get his mother's love and respect. The rocking horse rides where he is able to predict the race winners symbolize his doomed attempts in recapturing a part of control within a world which appears to be at random and in which he finds himself totally helpless. Freud furthers the concept of neurosis as an outgrowth of an individual's failure to balance instinctive wants with the demands imposed by society. In fact, Paul shows this inner conflict through his obsessive behavior. "Neurosis is the result of the individual's failure to adapt to the demands of civilization. It is a manifestation of the conflict between the individual's desires and the constraints imposed by society" (Freud, p. 47). According to Freud, sublimation is a defense mechanism whereby one redirects unacceptable desires into socially acceptable activities. In the case of Paul's insatiable need to win money in the story, it is sublimation taken even a step further: his ability to predict horse race winners sublimates his desire for his mother's love. However, this type of sublimation does not act to soothe his emotional pain but leads him to his destruction. Freud explains, "Sublimation is a means of diverting the instinctual desires into socially acceptable forms but it is no solution of the individual's unconscious emotional need. More often than not the sublimation aggravates the feelings of discontentment in the individual mind" (Freud, p. 60).

The tragic end of *The Rocking-Horse Winner* can be seen as a powerful example of Freud's "death instinct" or Thanatos, whereby Paul dies after securing a large amount of money for his mother. According to Freud, human beings are driven by two fundamental instincts: Eros, the life instinct, which aims for pleasure and preservation, and Thanatos, the death instinct that drives people toward self-destruction. Then Paul's death can be seen as the culmination of the inner tug-of-war between the two instincts. The wish to get his mother's love is overcome by the death drive of riding the rocking horse to exhaustion—Thanatos complete domination of Eros. As Freud said, "The death instinct is a part of human nature which always reveals itself in self-destruction." This instinct is closely related to the repression of wishes in that through it the ego tries to withdraw from the unpleasurable tension connected with the instinctual



claim" (Freud, p. 75).

The Discontents of Materialism and Emotional Estrangement

Hester's materialistic obsession is but the symptom of the greater disease that Freud examines in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. According to Freud, modern society places a wrong and excessive premium upon material success at the cost of emotional satisfaction. He writes, "The part played by so-called material factors is not important, though civilization sets a wrong and excessive premium on material life in forcing the individual to focus his main life effort first and foremost upon material wealth and social status rather than on emotional and psychic development." This stress on outward success results in a deep-seated dissatisfaction whereby the individual realizes that material wealth cannot satiate deeper emotional needs" (Freud, p. 53).

In the story, *The Rocking-Horse Winner*, the character of Hester substitutes emotional connection with materialism. She finds herself believing that money will bring her happiness, whereas it is loneliness, alienation from her own children, which evolves as she becomes wealthier. This reflects Freud's contentions that the pursuit of material success leads to emotional estrangement. Hester's inability to love her children is not so much due to her personal failures as it is representative of a certain societal sickness which has replaced the natural emotional needs of the individual with materialistic ones. As Freud declares, "The more one is concerned with material success, the more he becomes alienated from his true emotional self." This alienation carries with it profound dissatisfaction since one at this stage recognizes that one has sacrificed emotional fulfillment in exchange for social approval" (Freud, p. 58).

Paul's death at the close of the tale is a tragic remark on the negative power of materialism, that he is ultimately destroyed by the very thing through which he has sought, indirectly, the love of his mother. Freud's death instinct theory finds relevance in the fact that in Paul, self-destruction has been a sign of an inner war between the individual soul and an emotional unit that has perennial lust for material success.

Conclusion

D.H. Lawrence's *The Rocking-Horse Winner* is a powerful look at the unhappiness that develops from the battle between personal wants versus societal expectations. Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* can be used to consider the story as a reflection of that generalized dissatisfaction which defines modern civilization. Freud's theories of repression, neurosis, life and death instincts gain a powerful meaning in explaining the emotional-psychological mechanism in this story.

According to Freud, Paul's tragic fate is a personification of the inner conflict inevitable in a civilization; his obsessive need to win money and gain the love of his mother reflects the emphasis of society on material success, while his destruction testifies to the self-destruction emerging from the repression of instinctive desires. Hester's emotional alienation and her obsession with wealth further underscore the discontents of modern civilization because, according to Freud, material successes often come at the price of emotional well-being. In the long run, *The Rocking-Horse Winner* serves as a powerful critique of the social forces that engineer interpersonal relations and push people toward their destruction. Looking in-depth into this short story from within Freud's psychoanalytic perspective makes us alert to emotional and psychic undercurrents leading these characters through life toward the understanding of



the profound dis-content lying at the heart of modern human relations.

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