

The Rocking-Horse Winner



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF D. H. LAWRENCE

Lawrence had a relatively unhappy childhood. He was the son of a coal miner, had few friends, and was constantly ill. Eventually he made it out of Eastwood and attended University College, Nottingham, where he trained as a teacher. After graduation, Lawrence worked as a teacher while writing in his spare time. He eloped with Frieda Weekley, the former wife of his linguistics professor at Nottingham, in 1914. Weekley was of German descent, and she and Lawrence were accused of being German spies during World War II. After the war, Lawrence and Weekley left England and lived in Italy, Sri Lanka, Australia, and New Mexico. Over the course of his career, Lawrence wrote some of the best-known and most controversial works of modernist literature, including *Sons and Lovers* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. He died in France in 1930.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The text of "The Rocking-Horse Winner" does not directly relate to many historical events, except for its general setting of middle- and upper-class England, and what Lawrence considered to be the dehumanizing effects of greed in modern society. Lawrence's body of work, however, was in itself important for establishing a free press in the United Kingdom. In 1960, Penguin Books published an uncensored version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, whose graphic nature violated the Obscene Publications Act of 1959. Penguin Books was put on trial and charged with proving that Lawrence's book was a work of literary merit. The jury decided that Penguin was not guilty, and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was published in an uncensored edition. After this trial, it became much easier to publish explicit content in the United Kingdom.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Lawrence is best known for his novels *Sons and Lovers*, *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love*, and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. He also wrote many short stories, including "The Woman Who Rode Away," "The Kangaroo," and "Odour of Chrysanthemums," as well as over 800 poems and two plays. Lawrence wrote criticism about the works of a number of other writers, including Thomas Hardy (author of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*), Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville (author of *Moby-Dick*).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Rocking-Horse Winner

- **When Published:** 1926
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** Somewhere near Hampshire, United Kingdom
- **Climax:** Paul rides his rocking-horse so hard that he collapses
- **Antagonist:** Greed
- **Point of View:** Third-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Extended Edition. "The Rocking-Horse Winner" was made into a full-length film in 1949.

Fiction Section. The story was originally published in an issue of *Harper's Bazaar*.



PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins with a description of Hester, who has trouble loving her three children. Hester she feels unlucky because her family is running out of money, but she cares a great deal about appearing to be wealthy. The house seems to constantly whisper, "There must be more money!" and Paul (Hester's young son) in particular becomes concerned about the family's financial situation. When he asks his mother why they don't have enough money, she explains to him they are unlucky, and that luck is the reason people are rich. Paul claims that *he* is lucky, but his mother doesn't believe him, so he becomes determined to prove his luck to her.

Paul obsessively and furiously starts riding his **rocking-horse** because he believes it can take him to luck—a habit he keeps secret from everyone else. He also talks with Bassett, the family's gardener, about horse racing and places bets on the races whenever he "knows" who will win. Paul's Uncle Oscar finds out about Paul's betting and begins betting based on Paul's recommendations, which are always correct. Paul makes an extraordinarily large amount of money, but he also becomes increasingly anxious and intense.

Uncle Oscar helps Paul give some money to his mother anonymously, but the money only makes the whispering in the house worse. Instead of using it to pay off debts, Hester buys new furniture and invests in sending Paul to an elite school. Paul is more determined than ever to make the whispering stop, and he refuses to stop riding his rocking-horse, even when his mother suggests that he is too old for the toy. The Derby (a big horse race) is coming up, and Paul is obsessed with picking the winner.

One night, while at a party, Hester is overwhelmed with anxiety about Paul. She calls the nurse to see how he's doing, but when the nurse offers to check on him in his room, Hester decides not to bother him until she gets home. When she finally arrives at his room, she hears a familiar yet violent noise coming from behind the door. Paul is riding his rocking-horse so hard that he and the horse are lit up in a strange light. He announces in a deep voice, "It's Malabar" and then collapses to the floor.

Days later, Paul is very ill. Bassett tells Paul that Malabar (a horse's name) won the Derby, and Paul now has eighty thousand pounds. Paul is very excited to be able to prove to his mother that he is, in fact, lucky. But that night, Paul dies. Uncle Oscar suggests that Hester is better off having eighty thousand pounds instead of a strange son—but that Paul is also better off dead than living in a state where "he rides his rocking-horse to find the winner."



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Paul – Paul is the protagonist of the story. He is a small boy with strange blue eyes, and he seems to feel emotions so fiercely that he cannot control them. He recognizes that his mother Hester doesn't love him, and he becomes obsessed with luck – particularly luck that leads to financial gain – and proving to Hester that he is lucky. He starts riding his **rocking-horse** until he reaches a trance-like state in which it is revealed to him what horse he should bet on in upcoming horse races. Paul wants to make money for his mother (who values it above all else) and to stop his house from "whispering" about their family's constant need for more money. Paul becomes increasingly obsessive over the course of the story, and even transitions into an almost supernatural or inhuman figure. In the end he rides his rocking-horse with such intensity that he collapses and dies.

Oscar Cresswell (Uncle Oscar) – Oscar is Paul's wealthy, greedy uncle. He likes horse races and uses Paul's tips to make bets himself. He also encourages Paul to give Hester some of his winnings. When Paul dies, Oscar suggests that Hester is better off having the money Paul made instead of having a strange son—or at least that Paul is better off dead than living in such a state. Ultimately it's implied that Oscar values wealth above everything else, and was only using his nephew's strange ability for his own benefit.

Hester – Hester is Paul's mother, a middle-class woman with two other children as well. She is obsessed with appearances, and particularly with keeping up the appearance of being wealthier than she actually is. Hester believes strongly in luck, and thinks that she is unlucky because she married a man (Paul's father) who doesn't make a lot of money. At the beginning of the story, Hester feels cold toward her children and cannot make herself love them. By the end of the story,

however, she is overwhelmed with concern for Paul's well-being—although Lawrence doesn't show her reaction to Paul's death.

Bassett – Bassett is the gardener at Paul's house, a young man whose foot was wounded in World War I. He is also friends with Oscar Cresswell. Bassett talks with Paul about horse racing and is his partner in his initial betting (before Oscar finds out about it). Bassett is a serious but simple man who seems to value Paul greatly (even thinking that Paul has miraculous powers), and he keeps the money Paul wins in a safe place.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The nurse – The nurse tends to Paul and his two sisters. She answers Hester's phone call when Hester is worried about Paul.

Paul's father – Hester says that Paul's father is unlucky because his business ideas never yield any money.

Joan – Joan is one of Paul's two sisters. She is frightened by how furiously he rides his **rocking-horse**.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



GREED AND MATERIALISM

The plot of "The Rocking-Horse Winner" is fueled by a cycle of approval and greed. Hester sets this cycle in motion by seeking the approval of her neighbors. She does not have enough money to live the lifestyle that they do, but she wants their approval so badly that she becomes greedy for more material wealth. Her greed even makes her blind to the fact that her anxiety over money and the approval of others has a deep effect on her children. Paul and his siblings feel as though the house is constantly whispering that they need money, but when Paul manages to actually give Hester some money, her greed only grows. Instead of repaying her debts, she purchases new furniture and prepares to send Paul to a more prestigious school—investments which are tailored toward winning the approval of the outside world instead of providing comfort to her family or leading a sustainable lifestyle.

Paul's desire for approval also leads to greed, although he does not want any money for himself. Instead, he wants his mother to think of him as lucky, so he becomes obsessed with finding luck—so much so that he whips his toy **rocking-horse** and rides him furiously in an effort to obtain this state of "luck." In many

ways, Paul's greed is much less selfish than that of Hester, as he does not want money for himself, and only becomes greedy to help his mother and quiet the voices in his house. Hester's greed, on the other hand, is entirely selfish. But Paul's selflessness does not save him: he becomes so obsessive and intense in his pursuit of luck that he dies in the process. Ultimately Lawrence exposes greed as always harmful, no matter the intentions behind it.



LUCK AND HARD WORK

Hester defines luck as that which “causes you to have money.” She tells Paul that one is born lucky or not, and God chooses to make people lucky at random. Hester values luck because she believes that if she were lucky, she would be rich and never need to worry about working or losing her fortune. She tells Paul that she used to think she was lucky, but now she thinks she isn't because she married someone who doesn't make money (Paul's father). Hester's focus on luck rather than hard work or skill as the source of money gives her a kind of emotional benefit: she is able to blame her husband and the rest of the world for her lack of money instead of herself. Although Hester does try to work and make an income for herself, she doesn't make a great deal, and certainly not enough to cover her spending. Of course, making a little money is certainly better than making no money at all, but Hester continues to complain about her luck instead of working more or spending less.

Hester's focus on luck rather than work is disastrous for Paul. Paul internalizes his mother's lessons, and in him the emotional anxieties of the house become almost physical. Paul becomes fixated on being lucky—a luck he can only achieve through mad physical effort on his **rocking-horse**—in an attempt to quiet his house's whispers about his family's financial anxieties. And Paul's luck does come through: compared to the measly amount that Hester is paid for her work, Paul is able to win a truly enormous sum of money through his “hard work” (which, incidentally, is the very definition of useless labor—just rocking back and forth and producing nothing). But although Paul expends so much effort in the pursuit of luck, he is in the end very unlucky. Were Paul truly just “lucky,” he would be able to bet on a horse at random and that horse would win. Instead, Paul needs to work himself up into a frenzied state until he “knows” which horse to bet on. When Paul bets without “knowing,” he usually loses. Paul's struggle, in the end, gives no easy answers about luck and hard work, and why some things make money and others don't. Paul gains money not through luck, but only through his hard work and great personal sacrifice—essentially working for his luck—but Lawrence makes it clear that this is not an inspirational tale about the value of hard work, as the effort ends up killing Paul.



ANXIETY

Paul's home is so full of anxiety that even the house itself seems to worry over the family's financial situation. Hester and Paul, the two main characters, take different approaches to relieving their anxiety. Hester complains and spends more, while Paul works with Bassett and rides his **rocking-horse** frantically—but neither character is successful. In fact, both of them become more anxious as the story progresses. Paul is made so anxious by his whispering house that he starts obsessively riding his rocking horse for hours in search of “luck.” He does end up making lots of money this way, but Hester only becomes more anxious when she receives Paul's monetary gift. Further, as Paul becomes more obsessed with riding his horse, Hester grows anxious about him as well. In the beginning of the story, Hester seems to think little about her children, but by the end she is concerned with Paul's wellbeing—so much so that Paul himself tries to reassure her and tell her not to worry. Yet in the end, her anxiety does not compel her to pay enough attention to Paul to prevent his death—she is too focused on her own feelings, even if those feelings still relate to Paul. Anxiety thus is portrayed in the story as something that becomes separate from its initial cause, so that those who suffer from it often focus on the anxiety itself rather than on its causes.

Although this story is full of anxiety, that anxiety is rarely acknowledged out loud. Indeed, Paul and his siblings do not even discuss their mutual feeling that their house is whispering about the need for more money. Anxiety in the story is internal and unspoken, and it separates people. It is conveyed not through conversation or connection but silently, though the **eyes**. Paul is repeatedly described as having mad or frenzied eyes, particularly in contrast to the rocking-horse's cool and calm ones, and the children only use glances to “share” that they all hear the whispering house. Overall, this sense of anxiety and dread permeates the entire story, affecting the characters and their actions, and also the general mood of the work itself.



FAMILY AND INTIMACY

When Paul dies, Uncle Oscar implies to Hester that she is actually better off now—she has eighty thousand pounds and no longer has to deal with a son who was unfit to manage in the world. Oscar clearly does not care deeply for Paul, even though Paul is his nephew and helped him win thousands of pounds. Hester initially seems not to care for her children either and feels cold whenever they are around her. When Paul falls ill, however, she is overcome with “tormented motherhood.” While she previously felt stony-hearted toward her children because she was not attached to them, she now feels as though her heart has vanished altogether and *become* a stone. Instead of feeling coldness, she now feels loss and despair. Paul and Hester are not close during

Paul's lifetime, although they may have been growing closer—but then Paul dies, and Lawrence doesn't even show us Hester's reaction. Instead we just see Oscar's callous weighing of Paul's death in terms of its monetary value.

While Hester's emotions could certainly be interpreted as the feelings of love that a mother should naturally have for her son, some critics have interpreted "The Rocking Horse Winner" in a more sexual, psychoanalytical way. These writers see Paul's riding motion and the frenzied state he falls into while riding as metaphors for intercourse or masturbation. Since Paul rides the **rocking-horse** to please his mother in particular, some think that this story has Freudian undertones. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud believed in the existence of an Oedipal complex, or that young boys are first sexually attracted to their own mothers. According to Freud, healthy children grow out of this desire, but those with neuroses do not. Thus, while "The Rocking Horse Winner" can be read as a story about the pitfalls of luck and greed, it can also be interpreted as a portrait of sexual neurosis, and how Paul's frustrated Oedipal desires ultimately lead to his death.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE ROCKING-HORSE

The **rocking-horse** has multiple symbolic meanings in Lawrence's story. The fact that at the beginning of the story, Paul has a rocking-horse but not a tutor is proof of Hester's skewed values. She is very materialistic, and prizes her ability to buy her children beautiful Christmas presents more than she values their education. Rocking-horses are also toys that children typically age out of, but Paul continues to use his despite the many protests of his family members. His attachment to the toy suggests that he is not growing up in a normal way. Although the rocking-horse itself is a toy, its form is based on a real horse—an animal that can be wild and difficult to tame (or predict how it will act, as Paul seeks to do in his betting). In some ways, Paul might be compared to the rocking-horse: he seems innocent, but there is a wild force within him that cannot be controlled. He rides his rocking-horse so fiercely that the seemingly-harmless toy comes to seem malevolent and powerful, and perhaps even causes Paul's death.



EYES

Lawrence frequently describes his characters' **eyes** and uses them as indicators of a character's emotional state. He pays particular attention to Paul's eyes, which undergo a change over the course of the story. When

Paul first begins to ride his **rocking-horse**, his eyes are described as being "close-set" and having "a strange glare." This is in contrast the rocking-horse's eyes, which are wide set and bright. As Paul's obsession with luck intensifies, his eyes turn into "blue fire." At the end of Paul's life, he is so intensely focused on becoming lucky that his eyes are "uncanny," or strange and unsettling. "Uncanny" can also refer to something that is supernatural, and the appearance of Paul's eyes suggests that he has ridden his horse so hard that he has ceased to be human, or at least a normal, healthy one.

Eyes are also important communicative tools among the other characters in the story. The children recognize that their mother Hester does not love them by looking in her eyes. The children also use their eyes to communicate an unspoken understanding that they can all hear the house whispering.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *Selected Stories* published in 2008.

The Rocking-Horse Winner Quotes

☹☹ And so the house came to be haunted by the unspoken phrase: *There must be more money! There must be more money!*

Related Characters: Joan, Paul, Hester

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 270

Explanation and Analysis

Hester's reckless spending compared her moderate income (and the moderate income of her husband) creates debt for the family. Paired with this debt is constant anxiety of how the family will appear to the neighbors and to society. The pressure for money and to maintain a certain status and lifestyle creates tension, greed, and necessity in the house. Thus the family feels that the house is haunted by the unspoken words: "There must be more money!"

The lines of this "haunting" are repeated throughout the story, and though they do not seem to be spoken audibly by family members, the words are felt by the children, the mother, and even Uncle Oscar, who will later agree that the house is always short of money. The haunting is figurative, representing the family's constant desire for more wealth, but the whispering is felt and heard literally, too, by the children, in particular Paul.

☞ Yet nobody ever said it aloud. The whisper was everywhere, and therefore no one spoke it. Just as no one ever says: "We are breathing!" in spite of the fact that breath is coming and going all the time."

Related Characters: Joan, Paul, Hester

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 270

Explanation and Analysis

These lines describe the uncanny feeling that the house is always whispering that there must be more money. This constant whispering is then juxtaposed with the family's silence. The family does not communicate with one another or share their worries or anxieties, displaying a lack of intimacy and openness. Thus the greed and pressure for money is transformed into unspoken tension, and from this tension to the haunting that deeply affects the young children. This haunting, we see, becomes an essential part of living in the family and in the house, since it is compared even to the act of breathing. Money is equated with breath, which is constantly needed and fulfilled subconsciously to maintain life. By making this comparison, Lawrence shows the perils of overvaluing wealth or mistaking money for something that truly matters or gives life.

☞ "[Luck is] what causes you to have money. If you're lucky you have money. That's why it's better to be born lucky than rich. If you're rich, you may lose your money. But if you're lucky, you will always get more money."

Related Characters: Hester (speaker), Paul

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

One day Paul, the young boy, asks his mother, Hester, why the family doesn't own a car. Her throwaway, bitter response is that the family is unlucky, specifically she and her husband. She then defines luck as "what causes you to have money," and goes on to say that it is "better to be born lucky than rich," since "if you're lucky you will always get more money."

This response has a profound affect on Paul's young mind. He becomes so obsessed with luck and being lucky that he begins to orient his entire life through this lens. Here,

Lawrence portrays an attitude that he believed was plaguing modern society: Hester is materialistic and greedy, constantly desiring more money, but she does not equate success with hard work. Rather, she believes true wealth should be accumulated through luck; she shouldn't have to do anything. Likewise, since simple bad luck is the cause of her poverty (relative to her desires, that is), she doesn't have to do anything to fix it. She tries to work, but blames her modest income on a lack of luck and no fault of her own. Note also that believing that she is poor when in reality she is well-off (compared to most others) is another symptom of a greedy, materialistic society in which no amount of money or luck can satisfy the house's (and family's) hunger.

☞ Absorbed, taking no heed of other people, he went about with a sort of stealth, seeking inwardly for luck. He wanted luck, he wanted it, he wanted it. When the two girls were playing dolls, in the nursery, he would sit on his big rocking-horse, charging madly into space with a frenzy that made the little girls peer at him uneasily.

Related Characters: Joan, Paul

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

After learning his mother's opinions about luck, Paul becomes obsessed with this reality and the idea that he is lucky. He begins to retreat even beyond the regular lack of intimacy he experienced in the house, stealthily turning inward and becoming exceedingly anxious and private. He wanted luck—and note that Lawrence emphasizes the strength of this desire by repeating the phrase three times.

Here we are introduced to the physical activity which he believes will drive his luck and which mirrors his crazed mental state: the boy sits on his rocking-horse and rides it (in place) in a frenzy. This motionless effort at once makes no progress, since the horse doesn't go anywhere, but is also rewarded, since he eventually seems to reach the state of "luck" that he seeks.

Note also that the frenzied riding of the rocking-horse can be read as sexual and Freudian, pulsed with the strange desire for Paul to "get there" for himself and for his mother.

☛ And he would slash the horse on the neck with the little whip he had asked Uncle Oscar for. 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.

Related Characters: Oscar Cresswell (Uncle Oscar), Paul

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

Riding the rocking-horse and commanding it to "take me to where there is luck!" Paul whips the horse as if it is a living creature, and as if it will aid him in his quest for luck. He demonstrates his belief that he can force the horse to take him to luck, indicating that luck can be made or reached through sheer willpower and effort. The strange behavior seems indicative of neurosis and the anxiety generated by the materialistic pressure from the house and family, and also stems from the lesson on luck from his greedy mother.

We can note that these lines in particular lend themselves to a darker, more sexual reading, noting "mounting," "furious ride," and "get there."

☛ "Oh, well, sometimes I'm *absolutely* sure, like about Daffodil," said the boy; "and sometimes I have an idea; and sometimes I haven't even an idea, have I, Bassett? Then we're careful, because we mostly go down."

Related Characters: Paul (speaker), Bassett, Oscar Cresswell (Uncle Oscar)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 277

Explanation and Analysis

Uncle Oscar has recognized one of the rocking-horse's temporary names as that of a race winner, and has discovered that Paul and Bassett have been placing bets on horse races. Uncle Oscar then takes Paul to a race to see for himself what is happening, and they all place bets on Daffodil, who comes in first. After the win, Paul explains the

process for choosing a horse and the betting history he and Bassett have.

In this passage, Paul explains that sometimes he's certain which horse will win. Other times he has an idea, and sometimes he doesn't know at all who will win. In these final situations, they bet more carefully, since they usually lose money. Here, we see a complicated depiction of luck. Paul isn't classically lucky, since when he has no premonition about who will win he usually loses money and picks the wrong horse. It is only through his intense focus and work that he is able to "get there" and discover for certain which horse will win. At the same time, the ability to work for this information is another form of luck.

☛ "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 the whispering."

Related Characters: Paul (speaker), Paul's father, Hester, Oscar Cresswell (Uncle Oscar)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 278

Explanation and Analysis

Soon after cutting Uncle Oscar into his partnership with Bassett, Paul makes ten thousand pounds on a bet. When Uncle Oscar asks him what he plans to do with all of the money, Paul responds with the quoted lines. He explains that he started accumulating money for his mother. She said that she was unlucky and her husband was unlucky, so Paul wanted to be lucky in order to "stop the whispering."

What Paul is referring to is the felt anxiety and pressure for money in his home, caused by his mother's greed and materialistic obsessions. We can note that when Uncle Oscar asks what is whispering, Paul responds with "Our house. I hate our house for whispering." When Paul tells his Uncle that the house always needs more money, Oscar simply agrees, and ultimately confirms Paul's idea that winning can stop the whispering. Thus Oscar's own greed also fuels Paul's anxious need to keep winning more and more money for his family.

Oscar then helps Paul arrange to deliver his winnings to Hester. We can also note that Paul doesn't want his mother to know (yet) that he is lucky, or that the money is coming from him. The relationship is based on the strange belief that he needs to give her money to quiet the house, but not

share with her the fact that he is winning and is basing his entire reality on the notion of luck that she instilled in him. Thus Paul is seemingly acting out of love for his mother, but also is afraid of any real honesty and intimacy between himself and Hester.

☞ And yet the voices in the house, behind the sprays of mimosa and almond-blossom, and from under the piles of iridescent cushions, simply trilled and screamed in a sort of ecstasy: "There *must* be more money! Oh-h-h! There *must* be more money! Oh, now, now-w! now-w-w—there *must* be more money!—more than ever! More than ever!"

Related Characters: Paul

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

Though Paul has given his mother a large sum of money, the whispering hasn't stopped. Rather than using it to ease the financial pressures on the household, Hester spends the money and attempts to improve the family's lifestyle even more, investing in a tutor and a new school for Paul, as well as other luxuries like flowers in winter. By continuing in her materialistic pattern, Hester only increases the family's financial strain and anxiety.

Thus the voices in the house, behind all of the glamor purchased with Paul's winnings, become more excited than ever. Rather than whispering, the gentle push for money has turned into "trills" and "screams," saying that now, more than ever, there must be more money. There is urgency in the voice, and the amount of money required seems to have skyrocketed.

Here, Lawrence demonstrates how greed is insatiable, and how materialism and spending just begets more spending and debt without bringing any lasting happiness. The more money Hester has, the more she wants. The greed is constant, and Paul's influx of cash seems only to take his mother to the next level of desire and spending.

☞ He became wild-eyed and strange, as if something were going to explode in him.

Related Characters: Paul

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

The expression of the house's voices frightens Paul, fueling his anxiety. He studies with his tutor, but he devotes almost all of his energy to races with Basset. A few big races have gone by without him knowing who will win. In this state of anxiety and ceaseless desire for luck, Paul becomes "wild-eyed and strange, as if something were going to explode in him." These lines illustrate the tension building in him and the weird behavior he begins to exhibit. The mania is most apparent in his "wild eyes," which communicate emotions within the closed-off family where the spoken voice cannot. The growing greed and necessity for money is driving Paul towards insanity and illness, and his inhumane eyes symbolize this path and potentially communicate it to his family (though they don't seem to notice or care).

☞ He hardly heard what was spoken to him, he was very frail, and his eyes were really uncanny. His mother had sudden strange seizures of uneasiness about him. Sometimes, for half an hour, she would feel a sudden anxiety about him that was almost anguish. She wanted to rush to him at once, and know he was safe.

Related Characters: Hester, Paul

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 282

Explanation and Analysis

The Derby is approaching, and Paul still doesn't know who will win the race. He has reached a state of exhaustion, mania, and illness. The lines here say that he doesn't respond to what's spoken to him, showing that he is isolated and cut off from reality, focusing instead on his inward drive towards luck and money. His eyes are now "uncanny," and his mother, too, has become anxious.

Hester has changed from a cold, uncaring mother to an anxious, worried mother. Paul's strange behavior and eerie look in his eyes give her "strange seizures of uneasiness

about him." She is plagued by sudden rushes of anxiety, seeming to share in her son's internal struggle. In the moments leading up to the end of the story (and Paul's life) Hester becomes invested in his wellbeing and obsessed with him instead of with money, but the effort seems to be too little, too late.

☞ There was a strange, heavy, and yet not loud noise. Her heart stood still. It was a soundless noise, yet rushing and powerful. Something huge, in violent, hushed motion. What was it? What in God's Name was it? She ought to know. She felt that she *knew* the noise. She knew what it was.

Related Characters: Hester

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

While at a party two nights before the Derby, Hester becomes overwhelmed by anxiety and the idea that her son is in danger. When she returns home, she goes to check on him, and outside of his door she hears a noise, here described. The noise is strange, causing her heart to stand still. Lawrence describes it with the paradoxical "it was a soundless noise." It is at once violent and hushed, rushing and still. She feels like she knows what it is, she must know it, but she cannot figure out what the noise is.

When she enters the room, she witnesses Paul "madly surging on the rocking-horse." This scene is often read as the climactic moment in the story's Freudian reading, in which Paul's actions are sexual or masturbatory. The uncanny nature of the sound mirrors Paul's strange behavior and uncanny eyes, making Hester's discovery extremely tense and dramatic.

☞ 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.

Related Characters: Hester, Paul

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

Hester has just walked in and discovered Paul "madly surging on the rocking-horse." She asks what he's doing, and he screams in a strange voice, "It's Malabar!" naming the horse that will win the Derby. After this prediction, his "eyes blazed" at his mother, and he stops urging the horse. The blazing moment of strange eye-contact could represent the only moment of true communication in this scene, as eyes are indicative of emotional states and communicate when voices fail.

Paul then falls off the horse, crashing into the ground, and his mother, feeling her own climax of motherhood and fear for her son, rushes towards him to help him. This scene at once shows the terrifying discovery, the physical manifestation of anxiety and greed in Paul, and the intimate, maternal desire of Hester to help her boy in a moment of crisis. This is also the moment that Paul's secret is discovered: until now no one knew that he used the rocking-horse to make his discoveries and predict the races.

☞ "I never told you, mother, that if I can ride my horse, and *get there*, then I'm absolutely sure—oh, absolutely! Mother, did I ever tell you? I *am* lucky!"

Related Characters: Hester, Paul

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 284

Explanation and Analysis

Paul's condition has worsened; on his deathbed, Basset informs him (and Hester) that Malabar indeed won the Derby, and that Paul has won over eighty thousand pounds. The lines excerpted here are Paul's last words. He finally tells his mother what he has been hiding for so long. He tries to explain about the rocking-horse, how if he rides and "gets there," he can become absolutely sure of the race's winner. He then reveals to her the true source of his anxiety, desire, and self worth. He tells her what he has asked Oscar and Bassett to hide from her: "Mother, did I ever tell you? I am lucky!"

Hester responds with, "No, you never did." At his deathbed, she seems finally to have reached a state of proper love and care for her son. She says nothing about the announcement of the prize winnings. But her dull response seems to deny Paul the satisfaction of her finally knowing about his luck, and the line following her response is, "But the boy died in the night." His mother's efforts are too late. The cold tragedy is presented with absolute brevity. Hester's greed and materialism, along with her methods as a parent (instilling young Paul with a twisted worldview revolving around luck), caused great anxiety and anguish in a house that whispered for money. Obsessed with luck, winning, and "getting there," Paul drove himself towards insanity, illness, exhaustion, and a tragic early death.

“My God, Hester, you’re eighty-odd thousand to the good, and a poor devil of a son to the bad. But, poor devil, he’s best gone out of a life where he rides his rocking-horse to find a winner.”

Related Characters: Oscar Cresswell (Uncle Oscar) (speaker), Paul, Hester

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 285

Explanation and Analysis

These lines, spoken by Uncle Oscar, are the last in the short story. They epitomize the problematic greed that Lawrence criticizes throughout the story. Oscar exclaims that the mother now has over eighty thousand pounds and has lost a strange ("poor devil of a") son, implying that she is better off now than with her son alive. We do not see Hester's response to her son's death. Instead, we see Uncle Oscar compare the worth of the boy's life to race winnings and immediately decide that the money is worth more. This position shows the perils of taking greed and materialism to the extreme, where a human life is lost in pursuit of wealth and his family is mostly apathetic about it.

Oscar's final, enigmatic sentence, suggests that Paul, the "poor devil" (a phrase Oscar repeats), is also better off dead than alive in a world where he "rides his rocking-horse to find a winner." In one interpretation, this final line condemns the world for its absurdity. But it also could suggest that given the pain, anxiety, and craziness Paul has experienced in his ceaseless rocking-horse ride to luck, he is better off leaving that world and life behind to find rest.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE ROCKING-HORSE WINNER

The story opens with a description of a woman (still unnamed, but later revealed as Hester) who is unlucky. She used to be in love with her husband when she married him, but at some point she stopped loving him. The woman also struggles to feel warmth or love for her children, and she feels as though she needs to make up for some mistake she has made, although she is not exactly sure what that mistake is. Others in the town remark on what a good mother she is, but she and her children know that she is not.

Hester and her three children—two girls and one boy—live in a nice house and employ servants to attend to their needs. But although they appear to be wealthy, they are always running out of money. The father cannot make his ideas turn a profit, and the mother has no success when she tries to make money herself.

Everyone in the family feels that the house is haunted. It seems to whisper, “*There must be more money! There must be more money!*” Even the children’s Christmas presents—a **rocking-horse** and a doll house—repeat this refrain. The children do not speak of the whispering to one another, but they can tell from looking into each other’s **eyes** that they all hear it.

One day Paul, the boy, asks Hester why they don’t have a car and why they must take taxis everywhere. She explains to him that they are poor because Paul’s father “has no luck.” When Paul asks his mother if luck and money are the same thing, she tells him that luck is the reason that people have money.

For most of the story, Hester is nameless. This increases the story’s childlike and “fable-like” tone, but also shows how Hester is essentially a passive character. Hester believes that she is (relatively) poor because she was unlucky in marriage (not work), and she does not play an active role in her children’s lives. She is also very concerned with appearances—she’s good at seeming like a good mother, even if she knows she’s not.



Lawrence makes clear in the opening paragraphs of his story that the plot will revolve around money, or the lack thereof. Hester’s family is not actually poor—they just don’t have enough money to appear as rich as Hester wants to.



The story’s pervasive tone of anxiety and dread truly sets in here, as the children all seem to share the same hallucination that the house is speaking. There is also a clear lack of communication and intimacy even between the children—they don’t speak to each other about the voices, but only share significant glances. Hester again shows her materialism in that she buys expensive toys for the children rather than providing them with real intimacy.



This philosophy might make more sense if the family was actually poor, or if they had actually faced some problems they had no real control over. As it is, however, the family simply doesn’t have enough money because Hester spends it all. This speech might just be Hester feeling bitter and victimized in the moment, but it has huge repercussions on Paul’s psychology.



Paul is confused because he thought the expression “filthy luckier” referred to money, but Hester corrects him and says the expression is “filthy lucre.” She tells him that she would rather be lucky than rich because rich people can lose their money but lucky people never will. She further explains that she and Paul’s father are not lucky, and that only God knows why certain people are lucky.

Paul tells Hester that *he* is lucky, although he does not know why he decides to say this. She doesn’t believe him, and Paul becomes determined to prove his luck to her. Paul starts to search inside himself for luck and becomes overwhelmed by his desire for it. Eventually he starts madly riding his **rocking-horse**, looking into its wide, glassy **eyes** and asking it to take him to luck. He is certain that the horse can take him there, so he whips the toy into submission. His attitude toward the horse frightens his sisters.

One day Paul’s wealthy uncle, Oscar, interrupts Paul while he is riding his horse. He suggests that Paul is too old to be riding a **rocking-horse**, but Paul refuses to respond. He finally finishes his ride and tells Uncle Oscar that he went where he wanted to go. Uncle Oscar asks Paul if the horse has a name and Paul says the name changes, but that he was named “Sansovino” last week. Uncle Oscar recognizes that this was the name of the horse who recently won a major horse race. Joan, one of Paul’s sisters, tells Uncle Oscar that Paul talks about horse racing with Bassett, the family’s gardener.

Uncle Oscar asks Paul which horse he should bet on for the upcoming Lincoln horse race. After Paul makes Oscar promise “honour bright” that he won’t tell anyone else, Paul says to bet on Daffodil—a relatively unknown horse. Paul makes Oscar promise once again not to tell anyone else, because Paul has promised Bassett that the two of them would work together as partners. Paul is only helping Uncle Oscar out at all because Oscar gave him the ten-shilling note he used for his first successful bet.

Hester sees herself as blameless, and doesn’t consider that her actions might have something to do with the family’s financial situation. By saying that money comes from luck and that luck is God-given, she is able to be upset about her situation without actually having to do anything about it. This constant drive for more money and for a “luck” that seems unattainable is one of the sinister forces that Lawrence sees in modern society.



Just as Hester wants luck so that her neighbors think she’s wealthy, Paul wants luck so that his mother will think he’s lucky (and, presumably, will then be proud of him and love him more). Both are concerned with appearances, but Paul is willing to work hard to find luck, while Hester expects it to be given to her. It is never clear why Paul is so drawn to his rocking-horse, but it is obviously an important symbol in the story. A rocking-horse is a toy for a young child, and on one level it symbolizes Paul’s unwillingness to grow up, and his need to be constantly seeking his mother’s approval. In Freudian psychoanalysis, dreaming about riding a horse is symbolic of sexual intercourse, and some interpretations of the story have seen Paul’s rocking motion as representing sex or masturbation. Either way, there is something strange and disquieting about Paul’s frantic “work” on the horse.



Uncle Oscar interprets Paul’s comments about “getting where he wanted to go” and the horse’s changing name as the result of a lively imagination—he doesn’t take them seriously. Despite Joan’s discomfort with Paul’s behavior, no one steps in or asks what is going on. Paul’s family is not invested in him, and they allow him to go down what turns out to be a destructive path.



The story is very short, and lots of things happen without Lawrence stating them directly. By the time of this encounter, Paul has already been using his rocking-horse to achieve a state of “luckiness” and to pick the winners of horse races. Paul’s childlike language (“honour bright”) is contrasted with his adult occupation of betting large amounts of money, and with the disturbing, supernatural aspect of his frenzied rocking.



Uncle Oscar looks into Paul's bright blue and close-together **eyes** and promises he won't tell anyone. Paul tells his uncle that he is going to bet three hundred pounds on Daffodil and keep twenty in reserve. At first, Uncle Oscar doesn't believe him, but Paul explains that he and Bassett have made a lot of money betting and that Bassett keeps the money safe for Paul.

Uncle Oscar takes Paul to a horse race, and Paul's **eyes** look as though they are blazing when he watches the race. When Daffodil wins, his eyes continue to burn, although Paul himself is quite calm. Paul now has about fifteen hundred pounds of winnings. He offers Uncle Oscar a place as a partner with Bassett and himself, but only if Uncle Oscar promises not to tell anyone else.

Paul, Bassett, and Uncle Oscar go on a walk and Paul explains that they always win when he is sure of which horse he should bet on. Uncle Oscar doesn't totally believe Paul and Bassett, so he asks if he can see Paul's money. When he sees it, Paul explains to him that he bets almost all of his money when he's sure, but sometimes he only has an idea, and sometimes he has no idea at all. When Paul isn't sure, he and Bassett tend to do poorly, so they don't bet much money then.

Uncle Oscar asks Paul how he becomes "sure," and Paul explains that he just knows. Bassett says that the knowledge seems to come from heaven. Uncle Oscar agrees to join the partnership, and Paul makes ten thousand pounds on his next bet. When Uncle Oscar asks Paul what he's going to do with his money, Paul explains that he started betting for the sake of his mother (Hester). Paul hoped that if he became lucky, "it might stop the whispering." Uncle Oscar doesn't understand, but Paul explains that he hates the whispering in his house and that they never have enough money. Paul's **eyes** burn with "an uncanny cold fire in them," and he tells Uncle Oscar multiple times that he doesn't want his mother to know that he has become lucky.

Instead of giving Hester money directly, Paul gives five thousand pounds to Uncle Oscar, who takes the money to the bank and arranges for one thousand pounds to be sent to Paul's mother each year on her birthday. Paul is excited for his mother to receive the first check because the house was whispering even more than usual, despite the fact that Paul's mother had recently started a job drawing fabrics for a friend's drapery company.

Paul's eyes are described as close-together, and later on as "mad," while his rocking-horse's are wide-set and calm. Paul pretends to whip his rocking-horse into submission, but Paul is actually the wild one in the relationship.



Paul's eyes begin to take on a life of their own and they behave differently than does the rest of Paul's body. Indeed, Paul does not seem to be in control of his blazing eyes—instead, they seem to have a life of their own, as burning with greed and desire.



Were Paul to truly be lucky, he would not have bad days at the races. Indeed, he would not need to "know" which horse to bet on, but instead would simply make a lucky guess. The very fact that Paul has to work so hard for his "luck" means it isn't really luck at all. Of course, he can't see this, and he continues to pursue luck because that is the thing his mother values most.



In this scene, a second cause for Paul's mad riding is revealed: in addition to proving to his mother that he is lucky, he also wants to stop the voices in his house. These voices cause Paul an incredible amount of anxiety, but instead of talking to his mother about them and addressing the source of the problem, he decides that they will go away if he makes himself lucky. He doesn't understand that greed is an endless cycle that cannot simply be broken by more money. Once again Paul's eyes are portrayed as something supernatural and frightening.



Paul childishly believes that money is the answer to all his problems, when in fact, his problems stem from greed, a lack of intimacy with his mother, and possibly some kind of psychological neurosis. He is not growing up in a healthy way.



Hester's face turns cold when she receives the first check. Paul asks her if she had received any nice letters, but she says they were only "moderately nice." She then leaves the house and goes to the bank, where she asks if she can have all five thousand pounds at once. Following Uncle Oscar's advice, Paul agrees to give her all of the money at once.

Once Hester has the money, the house starts whispering louder and more madly than ever before. Instead of paying off her debts, Hester buys new furniture and secures a tutor for Paul so that he will be able to attend Eton, a prestigious boys' school. Scared of the horrible noises his house is making, Paul starts riding his **rocking-horse** more intensely than ever. But for a number of races, he fails to "know" which horse to bet on and he begins to lose money. He grows "**wild-eyed** and strange" and behaves as if he is about to burst.

Hester finally notices the madness in Paul's **eyes** and suggests that he go down to the seaside for some rest. Paul explains that he cannot go before the Derby (a big horse race). His mother tells him that gambling runs in the family, and she is concerned by how invested he has become in horse racing. Paul refuses to be sent away from the house. He assures his mother over and over that she doesn't need to worry about him.

Paul refuses to leave the house because he doesn't want to leave his **rocking-horse**—a secret about which even Bassett and Uncle Oscar don't know. When Hester decides that Paul is too old to stay in the nursery, Paul has his horse moved with him to his bedroom, even though his mother protests that he is too old for such a toy. Paul tells Hester that he wants the rocking-horse to keep him company until he is able to get a real horse.

As the Derby approaches, Paul becomes more and more nervous, and his **eyes** begin to look "uncanny." His mother becomes very worried about him. Two nights before the Derby, while at a party in town, Hester is overwhelmed with concern for Paul. The anxiety "gripped her heart till she could hardly speak," and she telephones the nurse (who takes care of the children) to make sure everything is all right. The nurse offers to go check on Paul in his room, but his mother doesn't want to wake him, so she waits to check on him until she gets home.

Sadly, the money Paul has worked so hard to win doesn't improve his mother's spirits—instead, she just wants more. Lawrence demonstrates here that greed is insatiable—as long as the greed itself is still there, no amount of money will truly satisfy it.



Once again, Hester chooses to prioritize the image she presents to those outside of her home over the feelings of her family within it. The intensity of the whispering makes Paul so anxious that he rides more than ever. He still hasn't learned that "luck" and money will not stop the house from whispering or make his mother love him, and so the madness inside of him continues to grow, as symbolized by his inhuman eyes.



Paul believes that if he rides the rocking-horse enough he solve all of the family's problems—essentially that he can free his mother from her worries by taking them upon himself. This isn't how anxiety works, however, and Hester and Paul only feed off each other, growing more anxious every day.



At this point Paul seems to know that his relationship with the rocking-horse is strange and unhealthy, and he does everything he can to protect it and keep it secret. Time is passing and Paul is growing older, but he still clings to the rocking-horse—a clear sign that he isn't growing up in a healthy manner. Once again, there may be a sexual aspect to Paul's shame and secrecy regarding his frantic riding.



Paul's eyes take on a supernatural appearance, as though another being is inhabiting his body. Hester's original coldness has gradually grown into a greater concern for her child (mostly in the form of new anxiety and worry), but this hasn't really brought the two together yet. She is on the road to becoming a better mother, but by now it may be too late.



When Hester arrives home and goes to Paul's door, she hears a violent, rushing noise coming from his room. She cannot identify the noise, although it sounds familiar to her. She opens the door finds Paul furiously riding his **rocking-horse**. A flash of light illuminates Paul and his horse and he says, "It's Malabar" over and over again in a strong, deep voice. Then Paul collapses on the ground and his mother rushes toward him.

There are many fantastical moments in this story that are never fully explained, but the extent to which Paul's body is taken over by a strange force certainly demonstrates the all-consuming nature of greed and blind desire. This scene once again could also be interpreted in light of Freudian psychoanalysis as related to the "Oedipal complex." Sigmund Freud believed that young boys are naturally first attracted to their mothers and want to replace or kill their fathers (as the Classical Greek character Oedipus killed his father and married his mother). Children only grow up healthily when they overcome this desire. The association here between Paul's frantic rocking, his desire to please his mother, and his mother "walking in on him" in the middle of the act all could suggest something like this. It is a testament to the power of Lawrence's story that so many interpretations could work for it at once—the dangers of greed, a boy trying to win the love of a cold mother, and a story of psychological and sexual neurosis.



Three days later, Paul's condition is critical, and Hester feels as if her heart has been replaced with a stone. Bassett comes in and tells Paul that Malabar has won the Derby. Paul asks his mother if she thinks that he's lucky. Paul says that if he rides his **rocking-horse** hard enough he becomes lucky. His mother says that she didn't know this. Paul dies that night.

Hester seems to finally feel an appropriate love toward her son, but it is too late—he's dead. Paul's death is presented briefly and coldly, as a tragedy stemming from all the causes listed above, but ultimately as just a small, sensitive boy being used by adults and by forces beyond his control until he could handle it no longer.



After Paul's death, Uncle Oscar tells Hester, whose name is finally revealed, that she is better off than she was before—she has lost a "poor devil of a son" but in exchange has gained eighty-thousand pounds in Paul's winnings. Uncle Oscar explains says that Paul is better off dead anyway, and he's "best gone out of a life where he rides his **rocking-horse** to find a winner."

It's notable that Lawrence doesn't give us Hester's reaction to Paul's death—whether she feels guilty, whether she truly grieves him and loves him, or whether his death has any effect on her materialism and greed. Instead we just hear Oscar's callous reaction to the death, weighing his nephew's life in terms of gains and losses (like the odds at a horse race). He suggests that Hester is better off with eighty thousand pounds than with a strange, weak son, but his comment about Paul is more difficult to interpret. It could just be a description of what he saw as Paul's strangeness, but it could also be that Oscar sees how "crazed" Paul had become—or even that Oscar understands that this world was too harsh and greedy for someone as sensitive as Paul, and Paul never would have been able to be healthy or happy.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Walker, Lanier. "The Rocking-Horse Winner." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 15 Mar 2016. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Walker, Lanier. "The Rocking-Horse Winner." LitCharts LLC, March 15, 2016. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rocking-horse-winner>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Rocking-Horse Winner* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Lawrence, D. H.. *The Rocking-Horse Winner*. Penguin Classics. 2008.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Lawrence, D. H.. *The Rocking-Horse Winner*. New York: Penguin Classics. 2008.