

# *Oedipus Complex in D. F. Lawrence's the Rocking-Horse Winner*

Liu Zhao

Inner Mongolia University, Hohhot 010010, China

**Keywords:** D. H. Lawrence, The rocking-horse winner, Oedipus complex, Interpersonal relationship

**Abstract:** Influenced by Freudian psychology, the famous short story The Rocking-Horse Winner by D. H. Lawrence shows Oedipus Complex in a hidden structure. This story is about a little boy named Paul who wants to earn money by riding rocking horse to know the winner in the horse-races. The reason he does so is to stop the noise in the room and make his mother happy. The poor boy finally dies of exhaustion. The expressions, reasons and the influences of this distorted relationship between mother and son are described by Lawrence with his typical symbolism. He reflects complicated relationships between people caused by money and social status.

## 1. Introduction

As a 20<sup>th</sup> English writer, D. H. Lawrence pays attention in the research of the relationship between human natures. He is good at finding out reasons that comes from human deep sense of crisis. His short stories, including *St. Mawr*, *The Daughter of the Vicar* and *The Captain's Doll*, approach symbolism, irony, humor and wit to reveal the essence of civilized world of mechanism. Because of its great literary and social value, the novels and short stories of him continue to be reprinted and to be translated all over the world. As Lawrence's late short story, *The Rocking-Horse Winner* although does not have great influence in all his works, it is considered as the master one from some modern literary critics. This story describes a little boy Paul who finds he can forecast the winner in the horse-races by riding his rocking-horse coincidentally in a fairy tale style. In order to satisfy his mother's greed, what he can do is just riding his small rocking-horse all the time to know the winner until he dies. the main theme of this story is the attack on the bourgeois industrialization or civilization as a detrimental agent to the humanity obviously. But in the other side, the author analyzes the relationship between son and mother with a great frankness, and such kind of sense is called Oedipus Complex. This hidden idea shows Lawrence's attitudes toward human relations, especially those between men and women in that period. This article mainly discusses how and why this complex presents and the significances of it.

## 2. The Expressions of Oedipus Complex in the Rocking-Horse Winner

### 2.1 The Explanation of Oedipus Complex

The Oedipus complex is a concept of psychoanalytic theory firstly created by Sigmund Freud, which comes from his *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). In Greek mythology, there is a strange forecast that the son (Oedipus) of the king of Thebes will kill his father and marry with his mother in the future. With great shock and sorrow, the old king decides to abandon this newborn. After going through many hardships, Oedipus grows into a young brave man in the other country and does a lot of great things, then he gets married with Jocasta, who is the queen of Thebes. But the truth is that he had already killed his father in a travel accidentally at that time, but he doesn't know his natural parents until a plague in this country. Freud puts forward the famous concept "Oedipus Complex" from this familiar myth. He thinks that each child must go through such kind of complex, and this period is very important because it matters whether the children can develop healthily or not in the future. In one of his books, he writes that:

During the phase of the normal Oedipus complex we find the child tenderly attached to the parent of the opposite sex, while its relation to the parent of its own sex is predominantly hostile. In the case of a boy there is no difficulty in explaining this. His first love-object was his mother. She remains so; and, with the strengthening of his erotic desires and his deeper insight into the relations between his father and mother, the former is bound to become his rival. (Freud, 1931:4588)

## 2.2 The Characteristics of Paul's Oedipus Complex

D. H. Lawrence's own experiences and stories show Freud's Oedipus Complex theory in many ways. There is a good example, which is his autobiographical novel *Sons and Lovers*. It reflects the feelings of loving mother and hating father obviously. According to the theory, the hero of this story, Paul, must go through such period, too. Like the other novels written by Lawrence, the setting of mother is quite better than the father. She is beautiful, but she doesn't have "luck", which is her favorite thing. Because her husband is "unlucky", so she always looks down upon him. The author doesn't talk too much on the father, but through the mother's attitude toward him and his behavior at the last time of Paul can reflect that this character is defiantly negative, which is full of indifference.

According to Freud's theory of mental apparatus, Paul's the construction of personal can be divided into three main sections. They are the ID, the ego, and the superego. His Oedipus Complex can also be shown from these three parts.

The ID is the sum of the instincts and desires that the individual is born with. It follows the principle of happiness. Paul's ID is directly expressed as a strong desire for maternal love. The little boy lives in a quiet wealthy family, but this family is always shrouded in a tension of lack of money. The mother is worried about having more money, which means the basic guarantee for her to maintain her luxurious lifestyle. In the long-term blind pursuit of material life, she gradually ignored the care for the children. Although Paul's parents provided him with a beautiful house, a big garden and even good education, his heart is fully suppressed by the voice which always screams "more money." (Lawrence,86) As a young child, he also wants to be cared for, but the truth is contrary to his wish. So, after he got the answer which can make his mother happy, Paul believed that if he had good luck, then he could get mother's attention.

The ego is a complex psychological process and psychological structure. People always believe that ego can connect the self and the outside world in many ways. As a "bridge", it makes communication of the ID and the superego easier, and plays a moderating role in both. Self-compliance is the principle of truth. In the novel, Paul's self-expression is that he decides to use the gambling horse to obtain money, thus solving the problems faced in reality. He had wanted to use the money he made betting on the horses to stop the horrid noise and to satisfy his mother materially, but that is not the case. Instead of being cared for by his mother, he made her more and

more greedy. As a last resort, he could only continue to gamble hard to make money. At this time, his self-regulation has become very disorderly. Obviously, the ID was suppressed by the strong superego. This poor boy felt worse and worse in the process of winning money from betting on horses. He could even feel no love from his mother. But in order to keep her happy, Paul oppresses himself. For his mother's sake, this little boy chose to sacrifice his happiness and eventually paid the life for it.

The superego is guided by ethical principles. Freud believes that it is a conscience, a moral law, and self-ideal that are erected by the parental authority for rewards and punishments. These factors prevent the instinctive energy from being released directly through impulsive behavior and desire gratification, or indirectly through the self-mechanism, and try to discontinue the pleasure principle and the reality principle. Paul's superego is manifested in his willingness to sacrifice his happiness, even his life. All he wants is his mother's smile and concern. *The Rocking-Horse Winner* reveals the corrosion of people's values by money and material in capitalist industrial society at that time. In this novel, Paul's parents have already become slaves to money, and all they want is money. Because this boy was brought up in the typical family in that era, so the importance of money was imprinted in his deep heart. Based on the above facts, Paul began to ride his rocking-horse in a crazy speed to find "luck". In fact, Paul doesn't enjoy this wired process. His dark blue eyes were always full of melancholy, and his pure heart had been eroded by the material values. Under the influence of the strong desire for money in the society at that time, his superego was quietly twisted. Supported by the belief that winning money would make his mother happy and content, Paul shook the horse wildly. In the end, driven by the superego, this little poor boy wins the bet, but loses his life.

Through the analysis of the above structures, it can be clearly seen that Paul has been living a repressed life because of the Oedipus complex. This kind of torture lasts for a long time, and the intensity is so great that it is unbearable for a child. So, when he rides on the horse and constantly whipping it, this behavior can be seen as a process of releasing pressure. Paul's determination to look for "luck" on the riding-horse not only shows his desires to please the mother, but also symbolizes the one kind of the "self-exploration".

## 2.3 The Obscure Reflections of Oedipus Complex in This Story

### 2.3.1 Four Key Conversations

There are four main dialogues between the mother and son which mirror the changes of their relations.

After the basic introduction, here comes to the first question puts forward by Paul, that is "then what is luck, mother?" (Lawrence,56) then the little boy says he is a lucky person to please his mother. But all the madam does is showing her hatred to the husband. She does not take Paul's words to heart. As a child who was extremely believed in his mother, Paul was eager to get his mother's attention, and finally he succeeded in finding a way to make money.

The second dialogue happens in the birthday of mom. The son gives his mother 1000 dollars through an anonymous way, but the mother still dissatisfied until she gets all 5000 dollars. The money not only paid off the debt, but also stimulated her mother's ambitions for unnecessary spending. In order to court his mother, Paul insists on giving her all the savings he has won in the race, which totally despite his uncle's advice that "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." (Lawrence,84) The mother smiled again and the son was full of joy. His confidence reflected the challenge to his father's status as one of these two men in the family. He believed in his mother's assertion of "luck" and totally believed in his own luck. All of them know, money is a sign of success. Mother loves money and she is obsessed with success. Son would naturally work hard in

this area in order to please his mother.

The next one is the boy refuses to go to the seaside. The mother feels sullen, but she reluctantly yielded to his demand. The son's firmness made this mother doubt her authority, but after weighing the pros and cons, she chose to follow her heart's decision. She agreed to her son's request, which was still based on her desire to control son. Tragedy came after she reluctantly yielded to his demands.

As for the last dialogue is about the death of the poor boy. At the end of the big party, the mother came back home. Although she had a bad feeling at the feast. Perhaps this is also a reflection of the mother-child interaction that the author wants to express. She even called the babysitter to confirm the safety of the children, especially her son, but after a reassuring answer, she chose to stay at an intoxicating party. When the mother hurried upstairs and saw her son fall to the ground, it was too late. On Paul's deathbed, all he wanted was just a compliment from his mother. But all he gets is just a sentence "No, you never did." (Lawrence,100)

The four main conversations not only reflect Paul's going further and further on the way to the mother's favor, but express the mother's strong desire to control the child. The more the son wants to prove himself to his mother, the more he will force himself to do things that damage his body. On the contrary, in order to obtain more benefits, the mother unconsciously put great pressure on the son... This cycle led directly and indirectly to Paul's death.

### 2.3.2 Four Key Details

Some details also are reflection of Oedipus Complex. At the first of the story, the boy knows his mother does not love him from the bottom of heart, but he still wants to attract her attention and earn money for her. Then he refuses his uncle's suggestion and gives his mother all money in one time just to please her. As for the mother, although she feels her children "had been thrust upon her,"(Lawrence,50) she focuses more on Paul.

The unspoken sentence that haunted the room is also very intriguing. "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!" (Lawrence,86) These words have been screaming from whispering to crazy. At first, the boy was just trying to please his mother and get over the "noise" in the room. He thought his mother would be satisfied with those money, but he had no idea of his mother's insatiable desires. Thus, the voice of the mother's desire for money became louder and louder. The author expresses the deep greed in Hester's heart through these noises. Instead of helping her to get rid of the obsession with the material world, Paul involves himself in it.

The other thing is quite subtle. Even though she is on a big party in town, she still too worried about Paul to have fun. On the night of the her boy's death, the mother wears dress of pale green which is the same color of her son's pajamas. As a master of symbolism, Lawrence used it to implicitly express the unusual feelings between mother and son.

At last, the poor boy died in a night. The child's uncle said that "he's best gone out of a life where he rides his rocking-horse to find a winner"(Lawrence,102) to the mother. Comparing a life with 80,000 pounds is a kind of contempt for life. The distortions of money and values are exposed relentlessly by the author at the same time. All of these things show both the indictment of industrial civilization and reflection of this distorted complex.

## 3. The Reasons of Oedipus Complex in the Rocking-Horse Winner

### 3.1 Internal Reason

Paul's psychological development grows up with him during his life. It is an inevitable part of

his personal development. Expect for the above, there is a distinct detail which can show Oedipus Complex from Paul. He refuses his mother's suggestion about going to the beach when a horse-racing is called Derby is ready to start. The obvious reason is about the winner of the race. The boy doesn't want to leave his rocking-horse unless he knows the name of winner. The second cause is obscure. Paul is unwilling to leave this house which means leave his mother. Separating from the mother is terrible for himself in the subconscious. According to Freud's theory, being separated from mothers is the last thing that children want to do. Even a brief separation would let children feel lack of security and full of anxious because they may think that their mothers abandon them completely.

## 3.2 External Reason

### 3.2.1 The Relationship between Lawrence's Personal Experience and the Story

Although D. H. Lawrence himself expressed the feeling of "hate" in his related novels about mother-child relationship, his own experiences and stories have reflected Freud's Oedipus Complex in many ways. His novel *Sons and Lovers* clearly reflects the feelings of the loving mother and hating father. Generally speaking, people always regard this story as an autobiographical novel. There are many details of this story are based on Lawrence's own life, in which Paul, Miriam and his mother can find prototypes in Lawrence's early life. This book not only protests against the natural environmental pollution and the destruction of sexual relations caused by the development of capitalist industry, but also reflects the double perplexities of the profound inferiority complex caused by social status and the depression of not correctly dealing with the marriage contradiction.

Lawrence has always maintained an attitude which is full of "fear" towards women. Most of the women in his works are stronger than men. Moreover, Lawrence had a strong admiration for women's own fecundity and mystery. Therefore, the men in his works are easily defeated by the irresistible power of women. The attitude of Lawrence's work to men changed after the First World War. His early works were more about the brutality and degeneration of men. After World War II, he began to turn to the expression of "male tenderness" while continuing the previous theme. Thus, before the war, Lawrence regarded men's role in promoting capitalist production and development as the source of dehumanization and social contradictions. But after the war, he regarded the male's fearless love with strong vitality and masculinity as the spirit which can guide mankind to a new life and save this society. Different with men, Lawrence's attitude towards women is obscure and complex. In his works, he is surrounded by multiple emotions that are afraid of women, obsessed with women, and conquered by the charm of women.

The unique artistic nature of Lawrence's works is reflected in the abandonment of traditional realist novels which are focusing on the narrative description of the daily life details and life experiences of the characters. His articles do not aim at shaping typical characters, but rather focus on the analysis of characters' mental activities and the relationship between them. The psychological exploration of the protagonist is also the focus in his works. Therefore, some people commented that Lawrence was one of the first writers who introduced modern psychology into novels. Compared with the narrative structures in his works, the symbolic techniques are more important means of description, which including poetic arguments and images. The works use a lot of metaphorical and imagery language, and these words are full of profound, subtle and philosophical connotations.

According to the influence of Lawrence's personal growth experience and writing techniques, Paul, the protagonist of this short story, has apparently experienced such a period. Like other novels written by Lawrence, Paul's mother's social status is much higher than the father. She is beautiful, who has the goodness that God has given to everything. But she is lucky, otherwise she will take all

of advantages. On this basis, the husband's "unlucky" directly led to his wife's discrimination against him. The author doesn't say much about the father, but through the mother's attitude towards Paul and his last behavior can reflect that this role is full of negative, arrogant and indifferent. There is no tolerance and understanding between husband and wife, but full of resentment. Such a relationship between them will inevitably affect every member of the family. The mother's disrespect for the father can plant a small, dissatisfied and, even resentful seed in the child's heart. Obviously, Paul has lost the best time and way to get his father's love.

### 3.2.2 Family Background

Children need to get the power from their father's love in the growth process, but the role of father is missing in this story. The father doesn't attend any development process of his son. He is even mixing a whisky and soda downstairs when the boy is dying. Because of the absence of paternal love, Paul can only get more attention from his mother.

### 3.2.3 Social Development

This reason influences Paul and his parents in different aspects. Through the tragedy of Paul, the impact of civilization on the capitalist industrialization is obvious. Under the influence of the idea of money-oriented, the relationships between people are full of utility instead of love and trust. Maternal love is nature, but this kind of love doesn't show too much in Mrs. Hester. This mother wants money so desperately that she even doesn't hide the eager in front of her son. To please his mother, the poor boy must try his best to earn more money until he dies. So is also the objective cause of Oedipus Complex in this story.

## 4. Particular Achievements of Paul's Oedipus Complex

### 4.1 Significances of the Development of Oedipus Complex in This Story

Mother's excessive pursuit of money made her lose herself and become psychologically distorted and bizarre, which directly led to Paul's death. She had an inescapable responsibility for Paul's death, but can we simply blame on her as the chief culprit? When she lost her first child, the son that "she felt they had been thrust upon her, and she could not love them," (Lawrence,50) "Who can know and understand her feelings that mention in the end of story?" When one of her rushes of anxiety about her boy, her fist-born, gripped her heart till she could hardly speak" (Lawrence,92). Who should be condemned for her sad ending? Therefore, Hyster is also a victim of materialization in modern society. Her nature is not bad, but she is severely tortured by external forces such as money and social status. In this novel, Lawrence reveals the greatest maladies of modern civilization through a slightly ridiculous tone through the changes in character and symbolism. Money can dominate everything, even the precious kinship. The theme of *The Rocking-Horse Winner* is consistent with *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which aims to expose the hypocrisy of capitalist industrial civilization and hope that people can recover the lost sincere feelings between them.

In this article, the author not only focuses on the Oedipus complex, which is created by Freud, but also reflects the current situation and the author's own concerns about social development. Although this short story is only a picture of Britain in the 1920s, it still has the practical significance for readers. The reason why the novel can resonate with readers is mainly because contemporary people's outlook on life and values are very similar to the heroine. Today, when science is highly developed, there are so many temptations that may lead people to folio. Human desires are always endless, whether it is physical desires, material desires, desires for success, etc. This desire is fulfilled, and new desires are born immediately. People are desperate to make money

in order to have luxury villas, advanced cars, gorgeous costumes and delicious foods. Others are racking their brains for the promotion of their positions. Every day people are frantically busy, as Paul as desperately rocking the horse, but do not know their own body has been overdrawn. Of course, people's pursuit of a comfortable life is understandable, but if they are too greedy, tragedy is likely to happen.

## 4.2 Literary Achievements of the Rocking-Horse Winner

In *The Rocking-Horse Winner*, Lawrence not only shows his favorite writing technique, which is symbolism, but also cleverly uses fantastic methods. He integrates reality and dream, takes rocking-horse as a overt clue, and transforms it into a racehorse using a trick. The tragedy of this article contains not only a single family, but the whole society. The significances of this tragic exploration lie in revealing the deeper social and psychological reasons behind the text, and arousing people's deeper thinking. Therefore, in addition to the analysis between Oedipus Complex and superficial consumerism, materialism and money supremacy, the imbalance of interpersonal ethics such as mother and son, father and son, husband and wife expressed in the recessive process is also very critical, which deserves deep exploration.

## 5. Conclusion

Oedipus Complex influences D. H. Lawrence's whole life, and it is reflected among his many works. He gains a steady stream of inspiration for his works from his early life, but in his later writing, he began to reflect this kind of complex deeply. Although this short story is still focusing more on the relationship between mother and child, the money-obsessed mother has clearly become a negative image. As an individual, the boy has own thoughts more expect loving his mother. He has the natural desire for power. He gets pleasure from the worship of servants and always shows the suspicions to his uncle before the man decides to become his partner. The big blue eyes are motioned many times between the lines. They are the symbols of Paul's mystery and independence as a man. These details all show author has the further consideration about this complex with the increase in life experiences and lessons. All in all, understanding Oedipus Complex in *The Rocking-Horse Winner* is an effective way to get familiar with the theme of Lawrence's late novels, even all works.

## References

- [1] Boulton. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of D. H. Lawrence: Late Essays and Articles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- [2] Drabble. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Beijing: Foreign language teaching and research press, 2005.
- [3] Gemini. *A Preface to D. H. Lawrence*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005.
- [4] Reeve. N.H. *Reading Late Lawrence*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- [5] Valentina Sturli. *Tragic Oedipus, Precarious Oedipus: Inheritance, Legacy and Crisis' Imaginary in Game of Thrones*. 2017.
- [6] Larry Stewart. *Freud before Oedipus: Race and heredity in the origins of psychoanalysis*. 1976.