
**ECONOMIC PRESSURE AND THE PERFORMANCE OF
MASCULINITY IN D. H. LAWRENCE'S *THE ROCKING-HORSE
WINNER AND THE HORSE-DEALER'S DAUGHTER***

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how economic pressure serves as a regulatory force that shapes masculine identity in D. H. Lawrence's short stories, "The Rocking-Horse Winner" and "The Horse-Dealer's Daughter," in conjunction with Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. The paper argues that the masculinity in Lawrence's narratives constitutes no natural or stable identity but rather one that is a socially compelled performance structured by financial anxiety, emotional repression, and cultural expectation. Lawrence exposes masculinity as a fragile and exhausting repetition of control that ultimately produces breakdown rather than coherence through Paul's obsessive pursuit of money and Jack Ferguson's faltering performance of authority. Lawrence links money, love, power, and gender in such a way as to make masculinity consist of a regulatory fiction inbred through repetition and liable to collapse once economic or emotional conditions change.

INTRODUCTION

The short stories of D. H. Lawrence are deeply engaged with the question of social structures and emotional experience. Lawrence's fiction again and again explores how social, cultural, and erotic factors impact subjectivity, often illuminating a conflict between what a character wants and what social obligations stipulate that character to be. The question of masculinity, in particular, appears in Lawrence not as a positive identity, a rehabilitation of male essence, but as a difficult struggle, indeed, often a painful one.

Lawrence sets up the male protagonists in *The Rocking-Horse Winner* and *The Horse-Dealer's Daughter* amidst conditions of economic impermanence and emotional turbulence. This is more than a portrayal of the personal moral or psychological strength inherent in the

individual protagonists. Instead, the framework through which they negotiate the notion of masculinity is thrown into disarray. Masculinity becomes less a personal trait than a performance that must be continually validated, particularly within the framework of economic insecurity.

This essay will demonstrate that Lawrence constructs masculinity as a performative identity, articulated through the presence/force of economic pressure, which is sustained through repression. The essay will utilise the concept of gender performativity, as described by Judith Butler, to demonstrate that Lawrence's masculine protagonists must reiterate socially authorised acts of power, control, and provision to render their masculine identity intelligible. These acts, rather than fixing identity, produce anxiety, fatigue, and dissolution.

Through the reading of *The Rocking-Horse Winner* and *The Horse-Dealer's Daughter* side by side, the article goes on to show how Lawrence portrays masculinity as a regulatory fiction, a social performance mandated through money, power, and the repression of emotion, which in turn destroys the very men who espouse this fiction.

Economic Anxiety and Masculine Crisis in *The Rocking-Horse Winner*

In the short stories of Lawrence, the male identity is very often situated not within the public sphere of politics or law but within the private domain. In "The Rocking-Horse Winner" and "The Horse Dealer's Daughter," the male identity is constructed not through action and recognition but through the anxiety and expectation of economics. In these two tales, the meaning of "money" is not just the issue of survival but the issue of worth and male identity.

In "The Rocking-Horse Winner," the very space of the house is filled with the pressure of economics. "The house whispers money, whispers it in their ears. It whispers it in almost audible whispers." Financial anxiety seems to have permeated every nook and cranny of life. The lack of complete affection on the part of the mother towards her children is inextricably connected with her lack of satisfaction with her economic conditions. Affection is made conditional on money. Emotional security and economic security are no longer separate in such an environment.

This is especially important when it comes to the construction of masculinity. Paul's father is described as "unlucky." This is a way of concealing structural economic failure as personal misadventure, as well as designating someone as an inferior provider. In the social ideology

situated within the text, there is an equivalence made between being masculine and being economic. To be economically unsuccessful, then, is to be masculine unsuccessful. The emotional marginalisation of the father figure, then, is ideologically based, as he is prohibited from occupying this place as masculine authority because he is unable to fulfil its economic role.

This lack produces a vacuum into which Paul strides as a substitutive masculine figure. As a child, he is the one who seeks to offer the remedy towards the stabilizing of finances. His relentless hunt for money is explained neither by greed alone nor even solely by the desire to fill the vacuum but derives from the crisis over masculine legitimation. Paul seeks to provide what his father finds unavailable: to be the provider, to control fate through money, to be the one who silences the whisper of lack.

In *The Horse-Dealer's Daughter*, the breakdown of the economy also means the breakdown of identity, but in a different way. Mabel's family has lost its prosperity and, as a result, its identity as a unit. The destruction of the economy destroys the psychological and social ties that hold the family together. Mabel's brothers go off on their own to survive, and Mabel is left caught between identifications, not as a daughter from a rich background, nor as anything else at all.

Jack Ferguson is introduced in this realm of collapse as a structural masculine presence. His saving of Mabel is an act not only personal in nature, but also symbolic in asserting a restoration of order. His masculinity is defined by action, power, and decisiveness. This manifestation is also non-essential. It is wholly governed by the context in which it appears.

Thus, both stories portray the construction of masculinity rather than its preexistence within the unstable economy. It is the needs of the economy, the needs of the heart, which make the protagonists in both stories resort to the performance of masculinity.

What Lawrence finds, in both tales, is that masculinity is a position of power that is a reaction to a perceived lack: it grows out of worry, not out of confidence. Masculinity is a necessity, a reaction that feels true not because it feels natural, but because it feels necessary.

Thus, economic pressure not only poses a threat to masculine identity; instead, it creates one. Masculinity becomes the act of compensating to conceal insecurity, create order, and reestablish legitimacy. But because it emerges from a position of instability, this performance

becomes unstable as well. The conditions surrounding the establishment of masculinity are self-destructive.

This contradiction, the construction of masculinity through the same means that endanger it, is the contradiction that runs deep through Lawrence's criticism. The male characters in his stories do not embody masculinity; rather, they struggle to maintain it.

Masculinity, Authority, and Its Unravelling in *The Horse-Dealer's Daughter*

Paul's activities in 'The Rocking Horse Winner' cannot but be acknowledged to be neither childlike imagination nor play but rather controlled and obsessive behaviour prompted by social pressure. Paul's activities on the rocking horse are far from play in the conventional sense of the term; they are more ritualistic and repetitive in nature, and they are performed in secrecy and with a great deal of hardship to Paul himself. It would seem that the play note has been eliminated from the incident. The 'rocking horse was no more a plaything but a machine, and Paul's use of it was more like work than play.' Paul's activities demonstrate his obsession with transforming himself into 'a master of power in a world of powerlessness through his obsessive physical activities.'

Each ride represents an attempt to master chance itself. The obsession, estrangement, and suffering of Paul are all for the purpose of achieving a certain level of knowledge in a world which is a world of chance and inadequacy. The world of the family represents a world which constantly faces the inadequacy of means, which trickles down to the psychological level. The desire for adequate means assumes the form of Paul's crusade. The ride represents an attempt to allow meaning to the meaningless, to allow chance to become controlled. But there also lies a social and cultural narrative of the control of chance through discipline and logic, which has come to represent the masculine ideal.

Thus, Paul's own repetition is not a literary strategy but an ideological tool. Paul reproduces his identity because the fact that he is an identity is already mediated through his repetition. Paul is not born a male but makes his maleness through a series of repeated acts. Again and again, he repeats his maleness through his mediated action and his emotional control. It is not that Paul is born a male. It is not that his responsibility towards his family is inherent. It is not that his silence is inherent.

Yet, the point is that Paul's masculinity is completely bogus and impossible. He is just a child, trying to play the adult part, but the conflict present in the body he owns and the one he projects is the core of Lawrence's criticism. His decaying body reveals the cost of his act. So, the rocking horse, which symbolically represents the enjoyment of childhood, changes to the tool of labour. Enjoyment is converted to labour. Imagination finds application. The body becomes the means of production. Where there is enjoyment, there is extraction.

The latter brings forth the violence of the performance of masculinity as needed. This Paul is denied the luxury of being a child, as the social-emotional organisation of the family needs a male presence to anchor it. As a result, the theme indirectly mobilises Paul into becoming a male too early in life, as his 'fatherly' presence has not succeeded within the family. Paul takes up the task of repairing the family's economy as well as attending to the emotional needs of the family as well. The problem with Paul's character is that because he conditions his love in terms of performance, he becomes synonymous with what he produces.

Paul's death, therefore, cannot be seen merely as tragic or merely structurally important. It tells us a lot about the ruinous consequences of equating value with economic productivity and of equating masculinity with sacrifice. Paul dies not because he is greedy for too much money but because he identifies too strongly with a system that demands too much from him. The tragedy of Paul's life, therefore, lies not in his greed but in his compliance with a cultural paradigm in which masculinity equals utility, usefulness and sacrifice.

Thus, Lawrence presents masculinity not as a liberating force but as a draining experience. It leaches the life out of the male figure and estranges him from any truly emotional experience. Paul's emotional experiences are reduced with the escalation of his performance. Paul fails to display his fearfulness, exhaustion, and yearnings. Nor does he get any love. Paul dispenses love. This setup makes it certain that Paul gets no love in return for what he dispenses. Nor do his sacrifices get Paul any closer to humans.

On this, masculinity emerges as the regulative ideal rather than the actualised identity and therefore the aim constantly pursued but never accomplished. The more Paul performs, the more he moves away from satisfaction to rest. Masculinity becomes the horizon that recedes with every step forward in its direction, the aim of which, upon achievement, results in depletion rather than recognition. It is at this juncture that Paul's body wears out as it works to sustain an identity of constant striving and precarious viability.

Through Paul, Lawrence shows that the instability of masculinity itself alone permits the existence of masculinity, and it persists only through constant sustenance. The reason for the same is that it persists, so to say, through strain and not through integration, and, therefore, it leads instead to weakness and not strength. It's rather the death of Paul that indicates the end of life, but the disclosure of the machine which eats up those who seek life.

The Body as the Site of Gendered Strain

Within the contexts of both "The Rocking-Horse Winner" and "The Horse Dealer's Daughter," the body of the male is the focal area where the tension of masculinity is marked. Paul's tiredness and Jack Ferguson's trembling hands are not external narrative components but rather pivotal indicators of Lawrence's commentary on the construct of masculinity. "The body is a tangible indicator of the external pressure of cultural demands." This is how the unvoiced emotions of the characters transform into physically embodied states of weakness or exhaustion that occur as a symbol of the need for "control, calmness, and strength" as demanded by masculinity.

Rather than a force that empowers the male body, masculinity encumbers it. The demand to enact authority, responsibility, and emotional self-sufficiency generates not confidence but duress. Paul's body is forced to exceed its limits through repeated exertion, and Jack's body betrays his emotional uncertainty in involuntary shaking. These bodily responses manifest precisely that masculinity functions, not as a natural expression of the body's capacities, but rather as a discursive practice that disciplines and acts upon the body. Accordingly, the male body is converted into a site of control rather than a site of agency, moulded and stretched by the obligation to fulfil societal archetypes.

Lawrence, therefore, postulates that not only is masculinity psychologically toxic but also somatically toxic. Masculinity is a venue where men must constantly be on guard, managing emotions and pushing down vulnerability. They must control and regulate their responses and maintain a level of mastery and composure even during times of fear, desire, and doubt. This is not something that strengthens his body and psyche, but rather serves as a depletion of them. Masculinity, therefore, is a form of labour, a laborious task of maintaining a self that is constantly unravelling.

This is especially true at points in the performance that are beginning to break down. Paul's breakdowns, as well as Jack's nervousness, are points at which the body intrudes on the

performance, revealing the points that the male performance is attempting to hide. This is at which the vulnerability is recognised as inevitable, and at which the male ideal must reject the needs of the body to realise the male ideal.

With this in mind, Lawrence uncovers the inherent contradiction of masculinity, which insists that men must be invulnerable even as they are subjected to the same forces that make them vulnerable. The more rigid the adherence to masculinity, the more the body pays the price for these restrictions. Strength becomes indistinguishable from strain, control from repression, as the outward mask of composure is a posture of repression.

Through the lens of corporeal dysfunction as opposed to the strength of masculinity, Lawrence upends the historical correlation between masculinity and bodily strength. For Lawrence, masculinity is not a source of strength, but rather vulnerability. In his storytelling, masculinity is not a source of wholeness, but rather a split between the body or the flesh, as Lawrence often uses these terms synonymously, and the self.

Finally, Lawrence establishes the male body as the witness to the violence of masculinity. This is the registration of what culture refuses to acknowledge: that emotional repression has physical repercussions, that the price of self-control is high, and that a constructed identity that is not one with itself results in fatigue. The male body is where the unsustainable nature of masculinity is made manifest. Thus, the male body is where the unsustainable nature of masculinity is witnessed. It is in physical exhaustion, rather than in ideology, that Lawrence attests to the unsustainable nature of masculinity.

CONCLUSION

In both "The Rocking-Horse Winner" and "The Horse-Dealer's Daughter," Lawrence presents masculinity as a visual identity that is not natural or constant, but rather as one that is maintained through economic duress. Lawrence's male protagonists are not men of means in masculinity to such an extent that it is theirs by right. Rather, they have to work to maintain their masculine identity. In these tales, masculinity is presented not as something one has, but as something one does, but something one does under duress. The instability of finance and emotion becomes not simply the backdrop against which one performs one's identity, but rather becomes that which drives one to perform that identity.

Paul's death and Jack Ferguson's confusion are two different but linked moments of male meltdown. In Paul's experience, the meltdown of masculinity happens through over-performance. Jack, on the other hand, experiences a meltdown of masculinity through emotional expression. When Jack moves from action to intimacy, it is revealed that the performance of masculinity he is engaged with has no fixed shape when it comes to emotional experience. Both men's experiences make it apparent that their masculinity is unsustainable, not inadequately performed.

These moments make it apparent that masculinity is a regulatory fiction, a social construct that imposes a certain standard, one that must be reiterated but never completed. Masculinity offers recognition, legitimacy, and inclusion, but only on a conditional, temporary basis. Masculinity calls for men to continually reaffirm themselves through control, productivity, emotional control, and power. But if success at capitalism is jeopardised, or emotional certainty undermined, then masculinity becomes precarious.

Lawrence's criticism is not moralistic, nor is it levelled against individual men. He does not offer his male characters as weak, flawed, or lacking. His focus is on how he finds these characters trapped within a structure where value is measured by wealth, power by control, and authority by the regulation of emotions. His characters' sufferance comes not from failure but from the contradictions inherent in their world. Masculinity maintains the requirement of resistance to vulnerability, despite the conditions of increased vulnerability it creates. Emotionally self-contained, it creates emotions of isolation. It is founded on the fear of the loss of control despite demanding complete control.

By laying bare such contradictions, Lawrence shows that masculinity is a system that devours those who seek to live it out. It is a system that distances men from real relationships, shuts down emotional expression, and turns human relationships into venues for performance and judgment. The end is not power but loneliness, not mastery but anxiety, not strength but exhaustion.

So, ultimately, Lawrence's fictional works present a notion of masculinity that is highly unstable because it is created externally and also maintained internally. Paul and Jack are not brought down by fate or nature, but because society requires that they become something that their emotional and physical selves are unable to withstand.

Lawrence thus lays bare the expensive nature of the performance of maleness, a performance which promises coherence but disintegrates, promises power but engenders powerlessness, and promises legitimacy but spawns alienation. The stories of Lawrence show more than the crisis of maleness. They lay bare the conditions for the possibility of this crisis. They thus ask us to consider not the improvement of the performance of maleness but the very definition of maleness, which necessitates this performance.