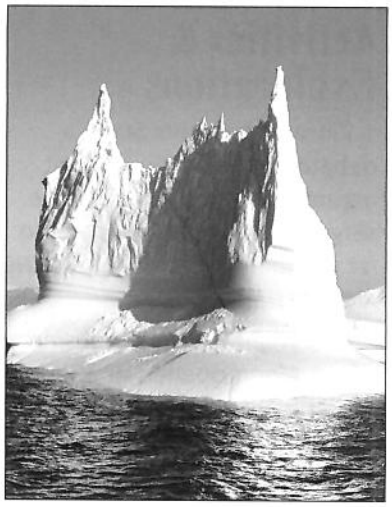
Irony in Modern Literature

Unsinkable Irony

To think about irony, let's consider the *Titanic* at three points in history: first, in 1912 when the magnificent ship went down in the North Atlantic and 1,500 lives were tragically lost; second, in 1986 with the exciting discovery of the *Titanic*'s wreckage; and third, in 1997 with the release of the blockbuster movie *Titanic*, the largest-grossing motion picture to date. The ghost of irony continues to haunt the great ship in several respects. It is ironic that the largest, strongest ship ever built would be brought down by an iceberg—and on its maiden voyage. It is also ironic that this tragedy at the beginning of the century would become, by the end of the century, a source of popular entertainment and titanic sums of money. Such is the nature of modern irony.



As with irony, there is more to an iceberg than what appears on the surface.

Irony as a Literary Technique

Irony in literature works very much like irony in everyday life. Simply put, irony is the contrast, often great, between expectation or appearance and reality. Generally, irony in literature is classified in three ways:

Verbal irony occurs when a writer says one thing but means another. Jonathan Swift's title for his satiric essay, "A Modest Proposal" (p. 611), is an example.

Situational irony occurs when a character or the reader expects one thing to happen but something entirely different happens. In Mary Coleridge's story, "The King Is Dead, Long Live the King" (p. 888), the king discovers the opposite of what he and the reader expect: his trusted friends and his wife are hypocrites and his enemy is a friend.

Dramatic irony is the difference between what a character knows and what the reader or audience knows. This type of irony is commonly used in drama: think of Duncan's expression of trust in Macbeth, just after the audience has heard Macbeth's desire to murder him. Dramatic irony also occurs in fiction when a character has a limited view of the events (or no view at all), but the reader is fully aware of what is going on.

A Short History of Irony

Irony has been present in European literature since ancient times. You can find examples of verbal, situational, and dramatic irony in Homer's *Odyssey*, the great Greek dramas, *Beowulf*, and the Old Testament. But ironically, the concept was not really named until the 18th century. The great 18th-century satirists primarily defined irony as a figure of speech: "saying the opposite of what you mean." You can see how Swift relies primarily on verbal irony in his satire.

At the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, the concept of irony began to take on new meaning. This shift was consistent with the philosophical shift in worldview from the Enlightenment to the Romantic Age. The former meaning of irony as primarily verbal (an intentional manipulation of language) now took on the added idea that irony is something that happens in life (something unintentional but real). For example, in the 18th century, Swift used verbal irony in "A Modest Proposal" to ridicule British policy in Ireland. In the 19th century, Shelley used situational irony in "Ozymandias" (p. 781) to expose the vanity of tyrants by contrasting the "colossal wreck" of the ruler's statue with its arrogant inscription—"Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

Benchmarks D.2.4.2, E.1.4.3, E.1.4.5

Modern Irony: Less Is More

Over the last century, irony has again undergone a transformation in meaning. For modernist writers—W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and others—irony became something larger than a literary technique; it became an attitude infusing the whole of a novel, a story, a poem, or a play.

This new ironic attitude of the modernists is seen as detached and questioning. Its source was the uncertainty that many felt at the core of modern life. Modernists refused to assume an all-knowing attitude. Instead, they aimed for complete objectivity in presenting ideas without commenting on meaning. Modernists regarded such restraint as an appropriate response to the complexities of modern life.

YOUR TURN With a couple of classmates, brainstorm ironic situations that you've encountered in your daily life.

A Study in Contrasts: Shelley and Yeats

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Readers of Shelley's "Ozymandias" understand the irony because of the clear contrast between Ozymandias's arrogant expectation and the inevitability of what actually happens. Shelley, like Swift before him, speaks with the authority of righteousness on his side, and readers agree that Ozymandias gets what he deserves. The irony in W. B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" is not so easily grasped. The poet's certainty is gone. In one way, the old man in Yeats's poem is similar to Ozymandias in his desire for "unaging" monuments. Yet, the old man is not a tyrannical king but a "tattered coat upon a stick." The reader tends to sympathize with him because he is lost and defeated by the reality around him. The contrast is not so much between expectation and reality, but between different aspects of reality—the living (and therefore "dying") generations of humanity and the monuments of the past (art, religion, and history).

William Butler Yeats

Notice that Yeats's irony is much more paradoxical, or contradictory, and less emotionally satisfying than Shelley's. In much of Yeats's poetry and the modernist literature that follows in this unit, irony is not just something that occasionally happens; it has become the nature of reality itself.

Strategies for Reading: Irony in Modern Literature

1. Be alert to anything in a work that seems contradictory or inconsistent with your expectations.
2. Keep the date of the work in mind. Consider how the early decades of the 20th century, with World War I and technological changes, may have shaped the views of a modern writer.
3. Draw conclusions about the type of irony that is used. Is the irony obvious so that you can point it out, or is the irony more subtle and a matter of tone and atmosphere?
4. Question what is actually the object of the writer's concern. Is the writer mocking or sympathetic to one attitude or behavior? Or, does he or she seem to be looking at things from multiple perspectives?
5. **Monitor** your reading strategies and modify them when your understanding breaks down. Remember to use your Strategies for Active Reading: **predict, visualize, connect, question, clarify,** and **evaluate.**

The Rocking-Horse Winner

Short Story by D. H. LAWRENCE

Benchmark E.1.4.1
FCAT Benchmarks A.1.4.2, E.2.4.1

Connect to Your Life

Best of Luck What do you think of when you hear the word *luck?* Are good luck and bad luck always what they appear to be? With a group of classmates, discuss your thoughts about luck, sharing any notable examples of good luck or bad luck you can think of.

Build Background

Horseracing In England, where this story is set, horseracing dates back more than 800 years. Two of the five great annual horseraces in England are the St. Leger Stakes and the Derby. Other notable English races mentioned in this story are the Grand National, the Ascot Gold Cup, and the Lincolnshire.

Large sums of money are bet on horseraces. The amount a bettor can win depends on the odds. The odds on each horse are expressed as a ratio—3 to 1, for example—and are determined by what proportion of the total amount bet on the race is bet on that horse. The more money bet on a horse, the lower the odds and the lower the payoff. For example, the odds on a "favorite" (a horse that many people have bet on) might be 2 to 1; if that horse wins, each person who has bet on the horse receives 2 dollars for every dollar bet. The odds on a "long shot" (a horse that few people have bet on) might be 20 to 1; if that horse wins, each person who has bet on the horse wins 20 dollars for every dollar bet.

Bettors can wager on horses to win, to place, or to show. A holder of a win ticket collects only if the horse finishes first. A holder of a place ticket collects if the horse comes in first or second, and a holder of a show ticket collects if the horse comes in first, second, or third; but holders of place and show bets on a winning horse receive smaller payoffs than holders of win tickets.

VIDEODISC **LaserLinks: Background for Reading**
Cultural Connection

WORDS TO KNOW
Vocabulary Preview
career
inconsiderable
obscure
parry
remonstrate

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS FORESHADOWING IN FICTION

In a short story a writer may use hints or clues at one point in the narrative to suggest events that will occur later. This technique, called **foreshadowing,** creates suspense and prepares readers for what is to come. As you read, look for clues about what will occur later in the story.

ACTIVE READING DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

In "The Rocking-Horse Winner," luck plays a significant role in the characters' lives, though Lawrence does not always explicitly state that role. To **draw conclusions** about the role of luck in the story, you must combine the facts that are stated in the text, the facts you must **infer,** and your own **prior knowledge.**

READER'S NOTEBOOK Use a chart like the one shown to note both the stated facts and the inferred facts about each character's experiences with luck.

Characters	Stated Facts	Inferred Facts
Paul		
Paul's mother		
Oscar		

There must be more money! There must be more money!
There must be more money!

The Rocking-Horse

D. H. Lawrence

There was a woman who was beautiful, who started with all the advantages, yet she had no luck. She married for love, and the love turned to dust. She had bonny[1] children, yet she felt they had been thrust upon her, and she could not love them. They looked at her coldly, as if they were finding fault with her. And hurriedly she felt she must cover up some fault in herself. Yet what it was that she must cover up she never knew. Nevertheless, when her children were present, she always felt the center of her heart go hard. This troubled her, and in her manner she was all the more gentle and anxious for her children, as if she loved them very much. Only she herself knew that at the center of her heart was a hard little place that could not feel love, no, not for anybody. Everybody else said of her: "She is such a good mother. She adores her children." Only she herself, and her children themselves, knew it was not so. They read it in each other's eyes.

1. **bonny:** pretty.

There were a boy and two little girls. They lived in a pleasant house, with a garden, and they had discreet servants, and felt themselves superior to anyone in the neighborhood.

Although they lived in style, they felt always an anxiety in the house. There was never enough money. The mother had a small income, and the father had a small income, but not nearly enough for the social position which they had to keep up. The father went into town to some office. But though he had good prospects, these prospects never materialized. There was always the grinding sense of the shortage of money, though the style was always kept up.

At last the mother said: "I will see if *I* can't make something." But she did not know where to begin. She racked[2] her brains, and tried this thing and the other, but could not find anything successful. The failure made deep lines come into her face. Her children were growing up, they would have to go to school. There must be more money, there must be more money. The father, who was always very handsome and expensive in his tastes, seemed as if he never *would* be able to do anything worth doing. And the mother, who had a great belief in herself, did not succeed any better, and her tastes were just as expensive.

And so the house came to be haunted by the unspoken phrase: *There must be more money! There must be more money!* The children could hear it all the time, though nobody said it aloud. They heard it at Christmas, when the expensive and splendid toys filled the nursery. Behind the shining modern rocking-horse, behind the smart doll's house, a voice would start whispering: "There *must* be more money! There *must* be more money!" And the children would stop playing, to listen for a moment. They would look into each other's eyes, to see if they had all heard. And each one saw in the eyes of the other two that they too had heard. "There *must* be more money! There *must* be more money!"

It came whispering from the springs of the still-swaying rocking-horse, and even the horse, bending his wooden, champing head, heard it. The big doll, sitting so pink and smirking in her new pram,[3] could hear it quite plainly, and seemed to be smirking all the more self-consciously because of it. The foolish puppy, too, that took the place of the teddy bear, he was looking so extraordinarily foolish for no other reason but that he heard the secret whisper all over the house: "There *must* be more money!"

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.

"Mother," said the boy Paul one day, "why don't we keep a car of our own? Why do we always use uncle's, or else a taxi?"

"Because we're the poor members of the family," said the mother.

"But why *are* we, mother?"

"Well—I suppose," she said slowly and bitterly, "it's because your father has no luck."

The boy was silent for some time.

"Is luck money, mother?" he asked, rather timidly.

"No, Paul. Not quite. It's what causes you to have money."

"Oh!" said Paul vaguely. "I thought when Uncle Oscar said *filthy lucker,* it meant money."

"*Filthy lucre*[4] does mean money," said the mother. "But it's lucre, not luck."

"Oh!" said the boy. "Then what *is* luck, mother?"

"It's what causes you to have money. If you're lucky you have money. That's why it's better to

2. **racked:** strained; tortured.
3. **pram:** baby carriage (a shortened form of *perambulator*).
4. **filthy lucre** (lo͞o'kər): money, especially that obtained through fraud or greed (an expression from the King James Bible [Titus 1:11] that has passed into familiar usage).

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."

"Oh! Will you? And is father not lucky?"

"Very unlucky, I should say," she said bitterly.

The boy watched her with unsure eyes.

"Why?" he asked.

"I don't know. Nobody ever knows why one person is lucky and another unlucky."

"Don't they? Nobody at all? Does *nobody* know?"

"Perhaps God. But He never tells."

"He ought to, then. And aren't you lucky either, mother?"

"I can't be, if I married an unlucky husband."

"But by yourself, aren't you?"

"I used to think I was, before I married. Now I think I am very unlucky indeed."

"Why?"

"Well—never mind! Perhaps I'm not really," she said.

The child looked at her to see if she meant it. But he saw, by the lines of her mouth, that she was only trying to hide something from him.

"Well, anyhow," he said stoutly,[5] "I'm a lucky person."

"Why?" said his mother, with a sudden laugh.

He stared at her. He didn't even know why he had said it.

"God told me," he asserted, brazening it out.

"I hope He did, dear!" she said, again with a laugh, but rather bitter.

"He did, mother!"

"Excellent!" said the mother, using one of her husband's exclamations.

The boy saw she did not believe him; or rather, that she paid no attention to his assertion. This angered him somewhere, and made him want to compel her attention.

He went off by himself, vaguely, in a childish way, seeking for the clue to "luck." 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. Wildly the horse careered, the waving dark hair of the boy tossed, his eyes had a strange glare in them. The little girls dared not speak to him.

When he had ridden to the end of his mad little journey, he climbed down and stood in front of his rocking-horse, staring fixedly into its lowered face. Its red mouth was slightly open, its big eye was wide and glassy-bright.

"Now!" he would silently command the snorting steed. "Now, take me to where there is luck! Now take me!"

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. He knew he could get there.

"You'll break your horse, Paul!" said the nurse.

"He's always riding like that! I wish he'd leave off!" said his elder sister Joan.

But he only glared down on them in silence. Nurse gave him up. She could make nothing of him. Anyhow, he was growing beyond her.

One day his mother and his Uncle Oscar came in when he was on one of his furious rides. He did not speak to them.

"Hallo, you young jockey! Riding a winner?" said his uncle.

"Aren't you growing too big for a rocking-horse? You're not a very little boy any longer, you know," said his mother.

But Paul only gave a blue glare from his big, rather close-set eyes. He would speak to nobody

5. **stoutly:** bravely; firmly.

WORDS TO KNOW **career** (kə-rîr') *v.* to move at full speed; rush

when he was in full tilt.[6] His mother watched him with an anxious expression on her face.

At last he suddenly stopped forcing his horse into the mechanical gallop and slid down.

"Well, I got there!" he announced fiercely, his blue eyes still flaring, and his sturdy long legs straddling apart.

"Where did you get to?" asked his mother.

"Where I wanted to go," he flared back at her.

"That's right, son!" said Uncle Oscar. "Don't you stop till you get there. What's the horse's name?"

"He doesn't have a name," said the boy.

"Gets on without all right?" asked the uncle.

"Well, he has different names. He was called Sansovino last week."

"Sansovino, eh? Won the Ascot. How did you know his name?"

"He always talks about horse races with Bassett," said Joan.

The uncle was delighted to find that his small nephew was posted with all the racing news. Bassett, the young gardener, who had been wounded in the left foot in the war and had got his present job through Oscar Cresswell, whose batman[7] he had been, was a perfect blade of the "turf."[8] He lived in the racing events, and the small boy lived with him.

Oscar Cresswell got it all from Bassett.

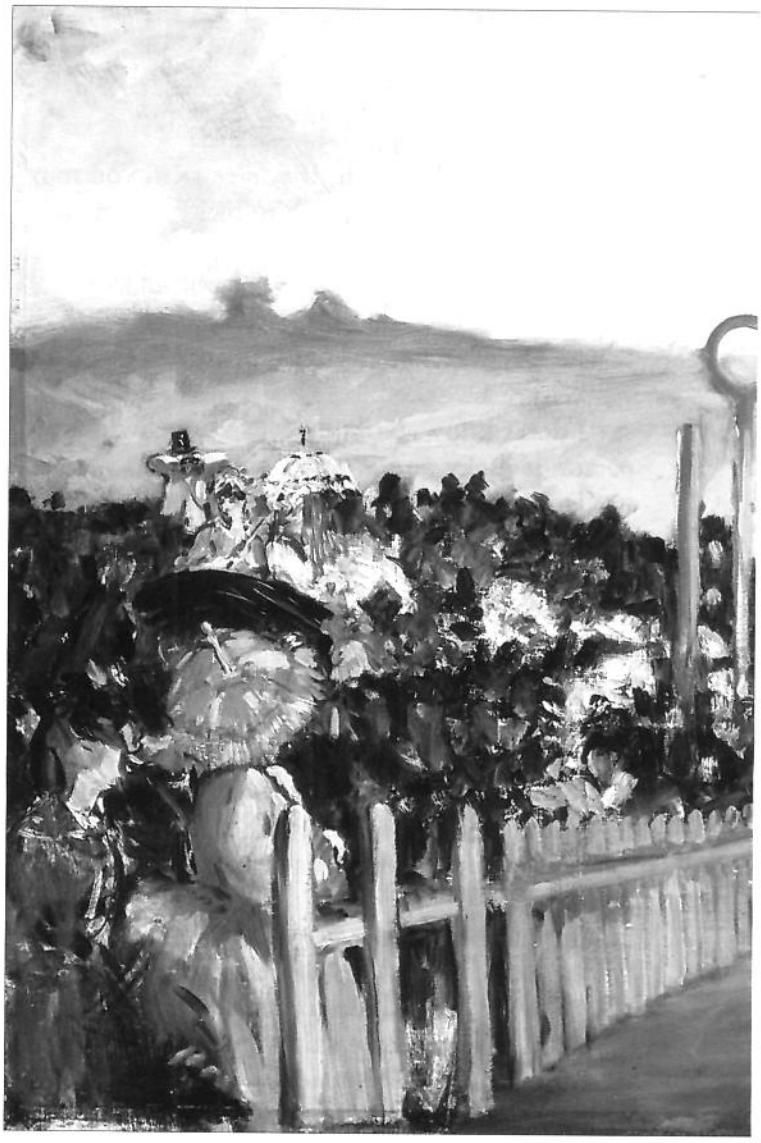
"Master Paul comes and asks me, so I can't do more than tell him, sir," said Bassett, his face terribly serious, as if he were speaking of religious matters.

"And does he ever put anything on a horse he fancies?"

"Well—I don't want to give him away—he's a young sport,[9] a fine sport, sir. Would you mind asking him himself? He sort of takes a pleasure in it, and perhaps he'd feel I was giving him away, sir, if you don't mind."

Bassett was serious as a church.

The uncle went back to his nephew and took him off for a ride in the car.



"Say, Paul, old man, do you ever put anything on a horse?" the uncle asked.

The boy watched the handsome man closely.

"Why, do you think I oughtn't to?" he parried.

6. **in full tilt:** moving at full speed.
7. **batman:** in Britain, a soldier who acts as an officer's servant.
8. **blade of the "turf":** one who is very knowledgeable about horseracing.
9. **sport:** good fellow.

WORDS TO KNOW **parry** (păr'ē) *v.* to respond by turning aside or evading (a question or argument)

The Races at Longchamp (1866), Édouard Manet. Oil on canvas, 43.9 cm × 84.5 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Potter Palmer Collection (1922.424). Photo Copyright © 1994 The Art Institute of Chicago, all rights reserved.

"Not a bit of it! I thought perhaps you might give me a tip for the Lincoln."

The car sped on into the country, going down to Uncle Oscar's place in Hampshire.

"Honor bright?"[10] said the nephew.

"Honor bright, son!" said the uncle.

"Well, then, Daffodil."

"Daffodil! I doubt it, sonny. What about Mirza?"

"I only know the winner," said the boy. "That's Daffodil."

"Daffodil, eh?"

There was a pause. Daffodil was an obscure horse comparatively.

"Uncle!"

"Yes, son?"

"You won't let it go any further, will you? I promised Bassett."

"Bassett be damned, old man! What's he got to do with it?"

10. **honor bright:** an expression meaning "on your (or my) honor."

WORDS TO KNOW **obscure** (ŏb-skyo͝or') *adj.* not well-known; undistinguished

"We're partners. We've been partners from the first. Uncle, he lent me my first five shillings,[11] which I lost. I promised him, honor bright, it was only between me and him; only you gave me that ten-shilling note I started winning with, so I thought you were lucky. You won't let it go any further, will you?"

The boy gazed at his uncle from those big, hot, blue eyes, set rather close together. The uncle stirred and laughed uneasily.

"Right you are, son! I'll keep your tip private. Daffodil, eh? How much are you putting on him?"

"All except twenty pounds,"[12] said the boy. "I keep that in reserve."

The uncle thought it a good joke.

"You keep twenty pounds in reserve, do you, you young romancer? What are you betting, then?"

"I'm betting three hundred," said the boy gravely. "But it's between you and me, Uncle Oscar! Honor bright?"

The uncle burst into a roar of laughter.

"It's between you and me all right, you young Nat Gould,"[13] he said, laughing. "But where's your three hundred?"

"Bassett keeps it for me. We're partners."

"You are, are you! And what is Bassett putting on Daffodil?"

"He won't go quite as high as I do, I expect. Perhaps he'll go a hundred and fifty."

"What, pennies?" laughed the uncle.

"Pounds," said the child, with a surprised look at his uncle. "Bassett keeps a bigger reserve than I do."

Between wonder and amusement Uncle Oscar was silent. He pursued the matter no further, but he determined to take his nephew with him to the Lincoln races.

"Now, son," he said, "I'm putting twenty on Mirza, and I'll put five on for you on any horse you fancy. What's your pick?"

"Daffodil, uncle."

"No, not the fiver on Daffodil!"

"I should if it was my own fiver," said the child.

"Good! Good! Right you are! A fiver for me and a fiver for you on Daffodil."

The child had never been to a race-meeting before, and his eyes were blue fire. He pursed his mouth tight and watched. A Frenchman just in front had put his money on Lancelot. Wild with excitement, he flayed his arms up and down, yelling *"Lancelot! Lancelot!"* in his French accent.

Daffodil came in first, Lancelot second, Mirza third. The child, flushed and with eyes blazing, was curiously serene. His uncle brought him four five-pound notes, four to one.

"What am I to do with these?" he cried, waving them before the boy's eyes.

"I suppose we'll talk to Bassett," said the boy. "I expect I have fifteen hundred now; and twenty in reserve; and this twenty."

His uncle studied him for some moments.

"Look here, son!" he said. "You're not serious about Bassett and that fifteen hundred, are you?"

"Yes, I am. But it's between you and me, uncle. Honor bright?"

"Honor bright all right, son! But I must talk to Bassett."

"If you'd like to be a partner, uncle, with Bassett and me, we could all be partners. Only, you'd have to promise, honor bright, uncle, not to let it go beyond us three. Bassett and I are lucky, and you must be lucky, because it was your ten shillings I started winning with. . . ."

Uncle Oscar took both Bassett and Paul into Richmond Park for an afternoon, and there they talked.

11. **shillings:** coins formerly used in Britain. (There were 20 shillings in a pound.)

12. **twenty pounds:** the equivalent of about $1,000 in today's dollars. (In the mid-1920s, a pound was worth about $5, and the purchasing power of a dollar was about 10 times what it is now.)

13. **Nat Gould:** a well-known British horseracing authority and writer.

"It's like this, you see, sir," Bassett said. "Master Paul would get me talking about racing events, spinning yarns, you know, sir. And he was always keen on knowing if I'd made or if I'd lost. It's about a year since, now, that I put five shillings on Blush of Dawn for him: and we lost. Then the luck turned, with that ten shillings he had from you: that we put on Singhalese. And since that time, it's been pretty steady, all things considering. What do you say, Master Paul?"

"We're all right when we're sure," said Paul. "It's when we're not quite sure that we go down."

"Oh, but we're careful then," said Bassett.

"But when are you *sure?*" smiled Uncle Oscar.

"It's Master Paul, sir," said Bassett in a secret, religious voice. "It's as if he had it from heaven. Like Daffodil, now, for the Lincoln. That was as sure as eggs."[14]

"Did you put anything on Daffodil?" asked Oscar Cresswell.

"Yes, sir. I made my bit."

"And my nephew?"

Bassett was obstinately silent, looking at Paul.

"I made twelve hundred, didn't I, Bassett? I told uncle I was putting three hundred on Daffodil."

"That's right," said Bassett, nodding.

"But where's the money?" asked the uncle.

"I keep it safe locked up, sir. Master Paul he can have it any minute he likes to ask for it."

"What, fifteen hundred pounds?"

"And twenty! And *forty,* that is, with the twenty he made on the course."

"It's amazing!" said the uncle.

"If Master Paul offers you to be partners, sir, I would, if I were you: if you'll excuse me," said Bassett.

Oscar Cresswell thought about it.

"I'll see the money," he said.

They drove home again, and, sure enough, Bassett came round to the garden-house with fifteen hundred pounds in notes. The twenty pounds reserve was left with Joe Glee, in the Turf Commission deposit.[15]

"You see, it's all right, uncle, when I'm *sure!* Then we go strong, for all we're worth. Don't we, Bassett?"

"We do that, Master Paul."

"And when are you sure?" said the uncle, laughing.

"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."

"You do, do you! And when you're sure, like about Daffodil, what makes you sure, sonny?"

"Oh, well, I don't know," said the boy uneasily. "I'm sure, you know, uncle; that's all."

"It's as if he had it from heaven, sir," Bassett reiterated.

"I should say so!" said the uncle.

But he became a partner. And when the Leger was coming on Paul was "sure" about Lively Spark, which was a quite inconsiderable horse. The boy insisted on putting a thousand on the horse, Bassett went for five hundred, and Oscar Cresswell two hundred. Lively Spark came in first, and the betting had been ten to one against him. Paul had made ten thousand.

"You see," he said, "I was absolutely sure of him."

Even Oscar Cresswell had cleared two thousand.

"Look here, son," he said, "this sort of thing makes me nervous."

"It needn't, uncle! Perhaps I shan't be sure again for a long time."

14. **as sure as eggs:** absolutely certain (a shortened form of the expression "as sure as eggs is eggs").

15. **Turf Commission deposit:** a bank where bettors keep money for future bets.

WORDS TO KNOW **inconsiderable** (ĭn'kən-sĭd'ər-ə-bəl) *adj.* not worth consideration; insignificant

"But what are you going to do with your money?" asked the uncle.

"Of course," said the boy, "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 whispering."

"What might stop whispering?"

"Our house. I *hate* our house for whispering."

"What does it whisper?"

"Why—why"—the boy fidgeted—"why, I don't know. But it's always short of money, you know, uncle."

"I know it, son, I know it."

"You know people send mother writs,[16] don't you, uncle?"

"I'm afraid I do," said the uncle.

"And then the house whispers, like people laughing at you behind your back. It's awful, that is! I thought if I was lucky—"

"You might stop it," added the uncle.

The boy watched him with big blue eyes, that had an uncanny cold fire in them, and he said never a word.

"Well, then!" said the uncle. "What are we doing?"

"I shouldn't like mother to know I was lucky," said the boy.

"Why not, son?"

"She'd stop me."

"I don't think she would."

"Oh!"—and the boy writhed in an odd way—"I *don't* want her to know, uncle."

"All right, son! We'll manage it without her knowing."

They managed it very easily. Paul, at the other's suggestion, handed over five thousand pounds to his uncle, who deposited it with the family lawyer, who was then to inform Paul's mother that a relative had put five thousand pounds into his hands, which sum was to be paid out a thousand pounds at a time, on the mother's birthday, for the next five years.

"So she'll have a birthday present of a thousand pounds for five successive years," said Uncle Oscar. "I hope it won't make it all the harder for her later."

Paul's mother had her birthday in November. The house had been "whispering" worse than ever lately, and, even in spite of his luck, Paul could not bear up against it. He was very anxious to see the effect of the birthday letter, telling his mother about the thousand pounds.

When there were no visitors, Paul now took his meals with his parents, as he was beyond the nursery control. His mother went into town nearly every day. She had discovered that she had an odd knack of sketching furs and dress materials, so she worked secretly in the studio of a friend who was the chief "artist" for the leading drapers.[17] She drew the figures of ladies in furs and ladies in silk and sequins for the newspaper advertisements. This young woman artist earned several thousand pounds a year, but Paul's mother only made several hundreds, and she was again dissatisfied. She so wanted to be first in something, and she did not succeed, even in making sketches for drapery advertisements.

She was down to breakfast on the morning of her birthday. Paul watched her face as she read her letters. He knew the lawyer's letter. As his mother read it, her face hardened and became more expressionless. Then a cold, determined look came on her mouth. She hid the letter under the pile of others, and said not a word about it.

"Didn't you have anything nice in the post for your birthday, mother?" said Paul.

"Quite moderately nice," she said, her voice cold and absent.

She went away to town without saying more.

But in the afternoon Uncle Oscar appeared. He said Paul's mother had had a long interview

16. **writs:** legal documents (in this case, demands for the payment of debts).

17. **drapers:** in Britain, dealers in cloth and dry goods.

with the lawyer, asking if the whole five thousand could not be advanced at once, as she was in debt.

"What do you think, uncle?" said the boy.

"I leave it to you, son."

"Oh, let her have it, then! We can get some more with the other," said the boy.

"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, laddie!" said Uncle Oscar.

"But I'm sure to *know* for the Grand National; or the Lincolnshire; or else the Derby. I'm sure to know for *one* of them," said Paul.

So Uncle Oscar signed the agreement, and Paul's mother touched[18] the whole five thousand. Then something very curious happened. The voices in the house suddenly went mad, like a chorus of frogs on a spring evening. There were certain new furnishings, and Paul had a tutor. He was *really* going to Eton, his father's school, in the following autumn. There were flowers in the winter, and a blossoming of the luxury Paul's mother had been used to. And yet the voices in the house, behind the sprays of mimosa and almond-blossom, and from under the piles of iridescent[19] 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!"

It frightened Paul terribly. He studied away at his Latin and Greek with his tutor. But his intense hours were spent with Bassett. The Grand National had gone by: he had not "known," and had lost a hundred pounds. Summer was at hand. He was in agony for the Lincoln. But even for the Lincoln he didn't "know," and he lost fifty pounds. He became wild-eyed and strange, as if something were going to explode in him.

"Let it alone, son! Don't you bother about it!" urged Uncle Oscar. But it was as if the boy couldn't really hear what his uncle was saying.

"I've got to know for the Derby! I've got to know for the Derby!" the child reiterated, his big blue eyes blazing with a sort of madness.

His mother noticed how overwrought he was.

"You'd better go to the seaside. Wouldn't you like to go now to the seaside, instead of waiting?

18. **touched:** took.

19. **iridescent** (ĭr′ĭ-dĕs′ənt): shining with a rainbowlike display of colors.

Spotted rocking horse, late 1800s. Wood with polychrome, 29″ × 53″, courtesy of Ricco Moresca Gallery.

I think you'd better," she said, looking down at him anxiously, her heart curiously heavy because of him.

But the child lifted his uncanny blue eyes.

"I couldn't possibly go before the Derby, mother!" he said. "I couldn't possibly!"

"Why not?" she said, her voice becoming heavy when she was opposed. "Why not? You can still go from the seaside to see the Derby with your Uncle Oscar, if that's what you wish. No need for you to wait here. Besides, I think you care too much about these races. It's a bad sign. My family has been a gambling family, and you won't know till you grow up how much damage it has done. But it has done damage. I shall have to send Bassett away, and ask Uncle Oscar not to talk racing to you, unless you promise to be reasonable about it: go away to the seaside and forget it. You're all nerves!"

"I'll do what you like, mother, so long as you don't send me away till after the Derby," the boy said.

"Send you away from where? Just from this house?"

"Yes," he said, gazing at her.

"Why, you curious child, what makes you care about this house so much, suddenly? I never knew you loved it."

He gazed at her without speaking. He had a secret within a secret, something he had not divulged, even to Bassett or to his Uncle Oscar.

But his mother, after standing undecided and a little bit sullen for some moments, said:

"Very well, then! Don't go to the seaside till after the Derby, if you don't wish it. But promise me you won't let your nerves go to pieces. Promise you won't think so much about horse-racing and *events,* as you call them!"

"Oh no," said the boy casually. "I won't think much about them, mother. You needn't worry. I wouldn't worry, mother, if I were you."

"If you were me and I were you," said his mother, "I wonder what we *should* do!"

"But you know you needn't worry, mother, don't you?" the boy repeated.

"I should be awfully glad to know it," she said wearily.

"Oh, well, you *can,* you know. I mean, you *ought* to know you needn't worry," he insisted.

"Ought I? Then I'll see about it," she said.

Paul's secret of secrets was his wooden horse, that which had no name. Since he was emancipated from a nurse and a nursery-governess, he had had his rocking-horse removed to his own bedroom at the top of the house.

"Surely you're too big for a rocking-horse!" his mother had remonstrated.

"Well, you see, mother, till I can have a *real* horse, I like to have *some* sort of animal about," had been his quaint answer.

"Do you feel he keeps you company?" she laughed.

"Oh yes! He's very good, he always keeps me company, when I'm there," said Paul.

So the horse, rather shabby, stood in an arrested prance in the boy's bedroom.

The Derby was drawing near, and the boy grew more and more tense. 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.

Two nights before the Derby, she was at a big party in town, when one of her rushes of anxiety about her boy, her first-born, gripped her heart till she could hardly speak. She fought with the feeling, might and main,[20] for she believed in common sense. But it was too strong. She had to

20. **might and main:** with all her strength.

WORDS TO KNOW **remonstrate** (rĭ-mŏn'strāt') *v.* to protest or object

leave the dance and go downstairs to telephone to the country. The children's nursery-governess was terribly surprised and startled at being rung up in the night.

"Are the children all right, Miss Wilmot?"

"Oh yes, they are quite all right."

"Master Paul? Is he all right?"

"He went to bed as right as a trivet.[21] Shall I run up and look at him?"

"No," said Paul's mother reluctantly. "No! Don't trouble. It's all right. Don't sit up. We shall be home fairly soon." She did not want her son's privacy intruded upon.

"Very good," said the governess.

It was about one o'clock when Paul's mother and father drove up to their house. All was still. Paul's mother went to her room and slipped off her white fur cloak. She had told her maid not to wait up for her. She heard her husband downstairs, mixing a whisky and soda.

And then, because of the strange anxiety at her heart, she stole upstairs to her son's room. Noiselessly she went along the upper corridor. Was there a faint noise? What was it?

She stood, with arrested muscles, outside his door, listening. 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.

Yet she could not place it. She couldn't say what it was. And on and on it went, like a madness.

Softly, frozen with anxiety and fear, she turned the door handle.

The room was dark. Yet in the space near the window, she heard and saw something plunging to and fro. She gazed in fear and amazement.

Then suddenly she switched on the light, and saw her son, in his green pajamas, madly surging on the rocking-horse. The blaze of light suddenly lit him up, as he urged the wooden horse, and lit her up, as she stood, blonde, in her dress of pale green and crystal, in the doorway.

"Paul!" she cried. "Whatever are you doing?"

"It's Malabar!" he screamed in a powerful, strange voice. "It's Malabar!"

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.

But he was unconscious, and unconscious he remained, with some brain-fever. He talked and tossed, and his mother sat stonily by his side.

"Malabar! It's Malabar! Bassett, Bassett, I *know!* It's Malabar!"

So the child cried, trying to get up and urge the rocking-horse that gave him his inspiration.

"What does he mean by Malabar?" asked the heart-frozen mother.

"I don't know," said the father stonily.

"What does he mean by Malabar?" she asked her brother Oscar.

"It's one of the horses running for the Derby," was the answer.

And, in spite of himself, Oscar Cresswell spoke to Bassett, and himself put a thousand on Malabar: at fourteen to one.

The third day of the illness was critical: they were waiting for a change. The boy, with his rather long, curly hair, was tossing ceaselessly on the pillow. He neither slept nor regained consciousness, and his eyes were like blue stones. His mother sat, feeling her heart had gone, turned actually into a stone.

In the evening, Oscar Cresswell did not come, but Bassett sent a message, saying could he come up for one moment, just one moment? Paul's mother was very angry at the intrusion, but on second thoughts she agreed. The boy was the same. Perhaps Bassett might bring him to consciousness.

21. **as right as a trivet:** in perfect condition.

The gardener, a shortish fellow with a little brown mustache and sharp little brown eyes, tiptoed into the room, touched his imaginary cap to Paul's mother, and stole to the bedside, staring with glittering, smallish eyes at the tossing, dying child.

"Master Paul!" he whispered. "Master Paul! Malabar came in first all right, a clean win. I did as you told me. You've made over seventy thousand pounds, you have; you've got over eighty thousand.[22] Malabar came in all right, Master Paul."

"Malabar! Malabar! Did I say Malabar, mother? Did I say Malabar? Do you think I'm lucky, mother? I knew Malabar, didn't I? Over eighty thousand pounds! I call that lucky, don't you, mother? Over eighty thousand pounds! I knew, didn't I know I knew? Malabar came in all right. If I ride my horse till I'm sure, then I tell you, Bassett, you can go as high as you like. Did you go for all you were worth, Bassett?"

"I went a thousand on it, Master Paul."

"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!"

"No, you never did," said his mother.

But the boy died in the night.

And even as he lay dead, his mother heard her brother's voice saying to her: "My God, Hester, you're eighty-odd thousand to the good, and a poor devil of a son to the bad. But, poor devil, poor devil, he's best gone out of a life where he rides his rocking-horse to find a winner." ❖

22. **eighty thousand:** the equivalent of about $4 million in today's dollars.

Connect to the Literature

1. **What Do You Think?** What scene or image in the story did you find most memorable?

Comprehension Check

- What happens when Paul rides his rocking horse?
- What does he do with his winnings?
- Why doesn't Paul want to leave before the Derby?

Think Critically

2. Why do you think Paul becomes obsessed with horseracing?

THINK ABOUT
- his mother's attitude toward money
- the "voices" in the house
- what happens when he rides the rocking horse

3. How would you describe the relationship between Paul and his mother?

THINK ABOUT
- his mother's view of herself and her family
- what she says about luck
- what Paul wants to do for his mother

4. Why do you think the voices get louder after Paul's mother receives the 5,000 pounds?

5. Who, if anyone, do you think is to blame for Paul's death? Support your answer with evidence from the story.

6. **ACTIVE READING** DRAWING CONCLUSIONS Based on the chart in your READER'S NOTEBOOK, what **conclusions** would you draw about the role of luck in the lives of Paul, his mother, and his uncle Oscar? For each **character,** is luck a negative, a positive, or a neutral force?

Extend Interpretations

7. **What If?** How might the outcome of the story have been different if Paul's predictions had started to fail?

8. **Connect to Life** Popular culture today is full of suggestions that people can achieve happiness by acquiring possessions. What do you think of this approach to life?

Literary Analysis

FORESHADOWING IN FICTION

A writer's use of hints or clues that suggest events and consequences that will appear later in a narrative is known as **foreshadowing.** The use of foreshadowing points readers to significant developments in the story and creates a **mood** of suspense. Early in "The Rocking-Horse Winner," the strange frenzy with which Paul rides his rocking horse foreshadows the tragedy of his final ride.

Cooperative Learning Activity

Working with a small group of classmates, use a chart like the one shown to list other examples of foreshadowing in the story. Note how each one prepares readers for the tragic ending.

Example of Foreshadowing	How Suggests Ending
Paul charging madly on his horse while his sisters watch	Foreshadows final mad ride

REVIEW IRONY Lawrence uses **irony**—a contrast between expectation and reality—to explore the meaning of luck for the story's characters. For example, Paul's mother's statement "If you're lucky you have money" (page 1008) is ironic when read in the light of the story's ending. List other examples of irony, explaining how each contributes to Lawrence's exploration of luck.

Choices & CHALLENGES

Writing Options

1. Advice Column Imagine you are Paul's mother. Write a letter to an advice columnist, asking for advice about Paul's odd behavior. Then write the columnist's response.

2. Alternative Ending Write a new ending for this story, in which Paul does not predict the winner of the Derby and does not die.

3. Detective's Report As a police detective, write a report of your investigation into Paul's death. Include statements from witnesses and a list of evidence gathered at the scene, as well as your own conclusions about the death.

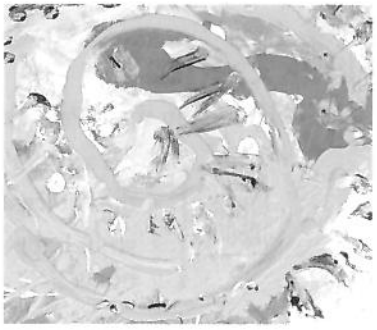
Activities & Explorations

1. Radio Play Work with a small group of classmates to rewrite a scene from this story in the form of a radio dramatization. Remember that a radio dramatization relies heavily upon dialogue, and be sure to include sound effects. You might also include descriptive passages for a narrator to read. Collaborate with other groups to tape-record a performance of the entire story. ~ **PERFORMING**

2. Story to Movie Watch the video of an excerpt from a movie adaptation of Lawrence's story. What elements of the story have been changed? Discuss why you think the filmmakers might have made the changes they did. ~ **VIEWING AND REPRESENTING**

VIDEO **Literature in Performance**

3. Abstract Painting Think about the emotions you had as you read this story. Create an abstract painting that expresses one or more of your feelings. Use colors that convey the intensity of your emotions. ~ **ART**



Inquiry & Research

Horseracing Research the career of a professional jockey. Find out what physical characteristics, skills, and education a jockey must have. You could investigate the entrance of women into the profession. Report your findings to the class.

Vocabulary in Action

EXERCISE A: ASSESSMENT PRACTICE For each pair of words, indicate whether the words are **synonyms** or **antonyms.**

1. **remonstrate**—agree
2. **career**—speed
3. **parry**—avoid
4. **obscure**—illustrious
5. **inconsiderable**—outstanding

EXERCISE B In groups of five, take turns pantomiming the meaning of each Word to Know. Choose the person who you think best conveyed the meaning of his or her word. Challenge members of other groups to guess which word is being pantomimed as the person repeats the performance.

WORDS TO KNOW career inconsiderable obscure parry remonstrate

Building Vocabulary

For an in-depth lesson on how to use a thesaurus to find a word's synonyms and antonyms, see page 574.

D. H. Lawrence

1885–1930

Other Works
Sons and Lovers
Women in Love
"Tickets, Please"
"Odor of Chrysanthemums"

A Miner's Son One of five children, David Herbert Lawrence was born in a coal-mining village in the central English county of Nottinghamshire. His early semiautobiographical novel *Sons and Lovers* (1913) is set in this region and reflects the conflict between his mother, who had been a teacher and poet, and his father, an uneducated miner. Lawrence was often ill as a child, and his mother, determined to keep him out of the mines, encouraged him in school, where he remained until he was 15, when financial problems forced him to take a job as a clerk and then as an elementary school teacher. After earning a teaching certificate at the University of Nottingham, he taught school in London for four years. He had already begun writing poetry and fiction, and his first novel, *The White Peacock,* was published when he was 26.

Controversy Strikes Although Lawrence was recognized as brilliant and imaginative, the passionate, sensual nature of his work made him one of the most controversial writers of the early 20th century. He not only broke literary conventions but also fought against the restrictive social, political, and moral conventions of his day. Many of his novels, short stories, and books of poetry were destroyed or had their publication delayed because censors objected to his treatment of relationships between men and women.

The "Here and Now" of Life Despite censorship, chronic poverty, and advancing tuberculosis, Lawrence wrote a remarkable number of stories, poems, and novels. He and his wife, Frieda, lived all over the world, trying to discover a better way to relate, live, and grow with other people. Later in his life, Lawrence wrote that "the magnificent here and now of life in the flesh is ours, and ours alone, and ours only for a time. We ought to dance with rapture that we should be alive." Today, Lawrence is studied and admired for the fresh perspective and style he brought to literature and living.

Author Activity

Questioning Conventions Critics have observed that much of Lawrence's fiction expresses a dissatisfaction with the values and limited viewpoint of conventional middle-class people. What evidence for this attitude can you find in "The Rocking-Horse Winner"?