

Paradoxical Power in The Horse Dealer's Daughter

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In D.H Lawrence's "The Horse Dealer's Daughter," Mabel Pervin and her three brothers are left with debts to pay after the death of their father. To pay these debts, the Pervins are forced to sell every horse that they own. Then, they must separately create new lives elsewhere. Although Mabel's brothers have decided where they will be going and what they will be doing, as the story opens, Mabel's fate seems undetermined. Her apparent inability to plan her future is initially a source of tension and conflict. However, the events that unfold make clear that the life that Mabel has led for the past twenty-seven years has molded her into a determined and independent woman. Through these characteristics, Mabel finds her strength. Yet ironically these qualities also make her see the horror of the loss of self-sufficiency that seem inevitable with the family's [breakup](#).

At first, Mabel's strength isn't very apparent. The initial scene, presented from her brother Joe's point of view, makes it appear that Joe may be a strong, dominating voice in the story. Furthermore, Joe and his brothers speak harshly to Mabel. The three brothers know what they're going to do now that they have to leave; Mabel does not. When Joe and Fred Henry question Mabel about her plans, she has little to say. In her silence, she seems

small and weak. Ironically, it is in her silence, however, that Mabel gains her independence and strength.

These qualities emerge through the image motif of horses Lawrence uses in the story. Like a [horse](#), Mabel is very powerful. For years she has been a workhorse of the family, especially since her father's death: "For months, Mabel had been servantless in the big hous...

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...ork. If her plan does succeed, then she will no longer be completely independent because she will be with Jack. If she loses her independence she loses her strength, and that ultimately will be her real death. Thus, to Mabel's ears, Jack's insistence that "I want you" is a "terrible intonation which frightened her almost more than her horror lest he should not want her" (256).

D. H. Lawrence's story, then, offers a subtle and complex psychological portrait of "The Horse-Dealer's [Daughter](#)." Mabel Pervin is both a manipulator of others and a victim of social circumstance. She is at once powerful and vulnerable. Perhaps these complexities and paradoxes are what make her seem so real, so human.

Works Cited

Lawrence, D.H. "The Horse Dealer's Daughter." 1922. Short Story Masterpieces. Ed. Robert Penn Warren and Albert Erskine. New York: Dell, 1958. 237-56.

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