

«Two households»

BY WINIFRED JOHNSTON, '24

TWO dominant traditions of America are represented in the households which Paul Green and Eugene O'Neill present this year in their plays *The House of Connelly* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. In these households, "both alike in dignity," the Old South and Puritan New England appear symbolized in terms of peculiar interest. In both a tradition is seen coming to an end.

In the two plays there are strange contrasts and stranger similarities. O'Neill's drama is more freighted with dark inevitability. But the old aristocracy of the South and the able gentlemen of New England are not unlike. "Top dog around here for near on two hundred years," they "don't let folks fergit it." Both eat the bitter fruits of their pride and their repressions. And both, even in their last defeat, awe anew the simple folks of field and town.

Type characters from the lower classes are used in both these dramas as a kind of chorus to inform the audience of past events, explain the characters, and provide perspective for an understanding of the people of the "big house."

Only in the last play of O'Neill's trilogy do the townfolk come to some independency of action. Throughout the other plays these people of various strata of society function only as human background for the Mannon drama. Through their eyes the Mannons are first seen. When one of the townfolk who have come to look and listen and spy on the rich and exclusive Mannons remarks about the "queer look" of Ezra's wife, Christine, another answers: "That's the Mannon look. They all got it. They grow it on their wives." It's a secret look, he says—as if it was a mask they'd put on. "Seth's growed it on too, didn't you notice—from bein' with 'em all his life. They don't want folks to guess their secrets."

In Green's play the tenant farmers' rollicking Christmas serenade provides obvious contrast to the ceremonial toasts given in the Georgian panelled dining-room of Connelly Hall. But it is in Big Sis and Sue, the Negro retainers, that the disintegration of the Connellys is

first sensed. These ancient sibyl-like creatures have known old Judge Connelly in his days of hard work, hard judgment, hard drinking and whoring. Now in a late winter afternoon they hear a gun fired far off in the fields. "Shoot dem doves, Mr Will Connelly," Big Sue says scornfully. "You can't hit um. Orter know it." "He can't do nothing," agrees Big Sis. "Creep about. Let de world rot down. Can't do nothing."

The words of Big Sis might almost be taken as a *motif* for both these plays. Both in *The House of Connelly* and in the *House of Mannon* the men "can't do nothing." The strength of these opposing traditions grafted from the Anglo-Saxon has gone into the family women. In them it appears in fearful forms.

II

It is Mrs Connelly who in Green's play represents the pride of race which would make a last stand against the terrible land-hunger of the lower classes.

Mrs Connelly has shared the accomplishments and glory of her husband, the "Old Master." In the eyes of her men she is the "possessor of all virtues known to womanhood and not one blemish." Against Patsy, the tenant girl, this feminine aristocrat wages a merciless war which brings herself at last to dishonor and death. For forty years she has faced the shame of the Connelly house; and when the crisis for that house comes she uses her knowledge with cruel courage: "Can't you see that girl's designs upon you, upon us all?" she asks her son. "She's making use of you to get what she wants. She's set out in cold blood to become mistress of Connelly Hall and you're helping her to it."

Aristocrat and tenant girl both are actuated by love of Connelly Hall and a desire to save it. But each sees its salvation in terms of her own heredity. Now, in order to preserve the social order she holds dear, Mrs Connelly uses her last weapon. Suddenly she changes her tone of voice.

MRS CONNELLY. Well, she loves you?

WILL. (After a moment.) Yes.

MRS CONNELLY. (Smiling.) You don't know a thing about such women as she.

WILL. (Defensively, like a boy.) I know she does.

MRS CONNELLY. (Smoothing out her dress.) And how do you know?

WILL. (In a low voice.) I know.

MRS CONNELLY. (After a moment.) Do you mean what I think—

WILL. (Looking at her in shamed triumph.) Well, whatever you think, I know she—loves me.

MRS CONNELLY. (Quietly.) It proves everything I've said if she's gone as far as that.

WILL. It does not.

MRS CONNELLY. Any honest woman would tell you she's done that to trap you.

WILL. I don't believe it.

MRS CONNELLY. I'm a woman and I know. (After a moment smiling.) Well, the Connellys are famous for that. You're one of them after all, aren't you? If she wants to play with fire, then let her get burnt. It won't be you, for you're not the woman.¹

There is another big scene in Green's play, in which the tenant girl, Patsy Tate, makes her memorable confession to the desire which gives the play its motivation.

Sick with the doubt of Patsy implanted in him by his mother, Will has taken to the worst habits of the older Connellys. Patsy comes to upbraid him for deserting the work he had undertaken to reclaim the place:

"I'm not begging you," she says. "I'm trying to reason with you. If you cared about the farm you'd understand."

"Yes," says Will, "You love the place and not me."

"I don't, but why shouldn't I?" she responds. "It's a sight more honest. The land never tricks you."

Then suddenly she realizes the enormity of her spiritual offense, that in order to gain what her mind wanted she has hurt something in herself:

"You're right," she cries to Will. "I set a trap to catch you and it's caught me... All my people have wanted land, land above everything. When we moved here I saw all this great plantation going to ruin. I wanted it, wanted to make something out of it. I loved you because you stood for all I wanted. I had never cared for any man. Never been interested in any man. I saw you liked me and I went on and on with you..."

"Patsy—" says Will. But she continues, heedless:

"And I went on planning. All that mattered was the land, growing crops, great crops, that's all I could think of. And so—I went to you—that night—led you on. (Shuddering.) After that I was different."²

In these scenes rather than in the play as a whole Green's work has its strength. It is interesting to find, therefore, that no character in O'Neill's powerful trilogy has the intrinsic appeal of Green's tenant girl. Patsy is a comprehensible creature, because a comparatively simple one. Vital, wholesome, well fitted to bear children to the old aristocracy, in her rests the seed of a new tradition to replace that which through her mating she destroys.

III

O'Neill's new play, like his *Strange In-*

¹Paul Green, *The House of Connelly*, Samuel French, New York, 1931, Pp. 78-79.

²*Ibid.* Pp. 95, 96.

can generally be arranged; if fear of instructor or of himself develops in a student the adviser can do much to allay it and to restore self-confidence. Many other occasions for the adviser's help, guidance and effort will occur to the thoughtful.

It is not too much to hope that successful work and worthy attainments will in time result in a tradition that declares that "chapter members do their work well!" Such a tradition would be well nigh irresistible.

To carry through such plan imposes no great financial strain upon a chapter or its alumni. Is there any reason why it should not, with suitable variations and such amendments as experience may show to be prudent, become a general feature of fraternity effort toward more efficient college work, both curricular and non-curricular?



«TWO HOUSEHOLDS»

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 305)

terlude, is a psychological study which probes deeply beneath the surface of behavior. His New England women are creatures of repressions more malignant than that which springs from the lack of material possessions. Sex is the root of their tortured complexities.

The "house's curse" is a storied infamy not unlike that which forms the theme of the Greek trilogy upon which O'Neill modelled his drama. O'Neill's work is the Puritan counterpart of the Electra story. It has its germ in sin: the love of Ezra Mannon's uncle for the Canuck nurse girl, Marie Brantôme. Ezra Mannon's father, too, had loved the girl. When he learned that Marie Brantôme had given herself to his brother, he invoked class pride to veil his jealous revenge. Driving his brother and the girl from the family home, he took advantage of his brother's need to get the latter's heritage for less than its worth. Then, "because he couldn't live where his brother had disgraced the family," he tore the old house down and built a new one. The new one is the "House of Mannon," whose six tall columns constitute a temple portico which, "like an incongruous white mask fixed on the somber gray ugliness of the building," dominates the fated action of Ezra Mannon's family.

Desire for revenge is the actuating motive in *The Homecoming*, the first play of the trilogy. Adam Brandt, Marie Brantôme's son, has returned from the sea to even his mother's score with General Ezra Mannon. He finds Ezra's wife, Christine, gifted with the same flaming hair which had characterized his mother. Loving Christine, with her he

accomplishes his desire—though at the cost of their own destruction.

Ezra Mannon is the most appealing of the characters in O'Neill's trilogy. A handsome man in the stern aloof fashion of the Mannons, he is as much a victim of the family fate as are his wife and children. "His movements are exact and wooden and he has a mannerism of standing and sitting in stiff, posed attitudes that suggest the statues of military heroes. When he speaks, his deep voice has a hollow repressed quality, as if he were continually withholding emotion from it." But his air is brusque and authoritative. He is an able man; and when the repressions released on his wedding night had turned his wife's love to hate, he had found compensation in increasing the family fortune.

Life to the Mannons had always been a meditation upon death. But the awful shambles of the Civil war made the meeting-house meditations meaningless to Ezra Mannon. On the night of his homecoming from the war he tries to surrender to his wife what's inside of him. He has come home hoping to do away with the barrier between them. He loves her. He loved her when they were married and he has loved her all the years between. He loves her now:

"I thought about my life—lying awake night—and about your life," he says. "In the middle of battle I'd think maybe in a minute I'll be dead. But my life as just me ending, that didn't appear worth a thought one way or another. But listen, me as your husband being killed that seemed queer and wrong—like something dying that had never lived."

He realizes that for a long time he has hardly been alive for her. "I saw that," he says. "I tried not to hate Orin. I turned to Vinnie, but a daughter's not a wife. Then I made up my mind I'd do my work in the world and leave you—alone in your life and not care. That's why the shipping wasn't enough—why I became a judge and a mayor and such vain truck, and why folks in town look on me as so able! Ha! Able for what! Not for what I wanted most in life! Not for your love! No! Able only to keep my mind from thinking of what'd I lost!"

Then in a note of final desperate pleading, "I'm sick of death. I want to live! Maybe you could love me now! I've got to make you love me!"

But it is too late for Ezra Mannon to plead with his wife. Long ago the tragic patterns of their lives were set. Christine has committed herself to Adam Brandt and now she answers her husband wildly:

"For God's sake, stop talking! I don't know what you're saying. Leave me alone! What must be, must be! You make me weak!"³

In an earlier scene, important for its disclosure of the confused inhibitions and perversions actuating the drama,

³Eugene O'Neill, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Horace Liveright, Inc., New York, 1931. Pp. 81-84.

Christine had confessed to her daughter what it had meant to give her body for twenty years to a man she hated. Lavinia, jealous of Brandt's love for her mother, had spied upon the couple and then taunted her mother by threatening to tell her father. Now she is horrified at the confession her mother makes:

LAVINIA. (*Trying to break away from her, half putting her hands up to her ears*) Stop telling me such things! Let me go! (*She breaks away, shrinking from her mother with a look of sick repulsion. A pause, She stammers*) You—then you've always hated Father?

CHRISTINE. (*Bitterly*) No. I loved him once—before I married him—incredible as that seems now! He was handsome in his lieutenant's uniform! He was silent and mysterious and romantic! But marriage soon turned his romance into—disgust!

LAVINIA. (*Wincing again—Stammers harshly*) So I was born of your disgust! I've always guessed that, Mother—ever since I was little—when I used to come to you—with love—but you would always push me away! I've felt it ever since I can remember—your disgust! (*Then with a flare-up of bitter hatred*) Oh, I hate you! It's only right I should hate you!

CHRISTINE. (*Shaken—defensively*) I tried to love you. I told myself it wasn't human not to love my own child, born of my body. But I never could make myself feel you were born of any body but his! You were always my wedding night to me—and my honeymoon!

LAVINIA. Stop saying that! How can you be so—! (*Then suddenly—with a strange, jealous bitterness*) You've loved Orin! Why didn't you hate him, too?

CHRISTINE. Because by then I had forced myself to become resigned in order to live! And most of the time I was carrying him, your father was with the army in Mexico. I had forgotten him. And when Orin was born he seemed my child, only mine, and I loved him for that! (*Bitterly*) I loved him until he let you and your father nag him into the war, in spite of my begging him not to leave me alone. (*Staring at Lavinia with hatred*) I know his leaving me was your doing principally, Vinnie . . . I hope you realize I never would have fallen in love with Adam if I'd had Orin with me. When he had gone there was nothing left—but hate and a desire to be revenged—and a longing for love! And it was then I met Adam. I saw he loved me—

LAVINIA. (*With taunting scorn*) He doesn't love you! You're only his revenge on Father! Do you know who he really is? He's the son of that low nurse girl Grandfather put out of our house!⁴

In the sterility and the incestuous insanity of Ezra Mannon's children, the revenge of the nurse girl finds its last fulfilment.

This revenge indeed was sure. There was little need of Marie Brantôme's son assuming the part of active agent in her revenge. The destruction of this household represents no triumph of external forces. Its fall is one brought about by internal decay. In Orin and Lavinia this deterioration is made complete. When the daughter of the Mannons, after rejecting her lover, turns and marches woodenly into the great house, closing the door behind her, she embraces the fate which brings the tradition of her household to its end.

⁴*Ibid.* Pp. 50-52.