«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 in-end. Both a tradition is seen coming to an end. In and Puritan New England appears symbolized in terms of peculiar interest. In

Becomes Electra.

O'Neill present this year in their plays about the "queer look" of Ezra's wife, rich and exclusive Mannons remarks theireyesthe Mannons are firstseen. This groundfor the Mannon drama. Through the "bighouse." They provide perspective for an understanding past events, explain the characters, and their repressions. And both, even in their last defeat, awe anew the simple folksoffield 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 townsfolk 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 townsfolk who have come to look and listen and spy on the rich and exclusive Mannons remarks 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. "Set'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 Connelys 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 gifted 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.

Well. (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 stunted 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."

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 old 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 never had cared for any man. Never been interested in any man. I saw you liked me and I went on and on with you..."

"Patsy's" says Will. But she continues, hedged.

"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 it 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 rejects 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-

2 ibid. Pp. 95, 96. (TURN TO PAGE 328, PLEASE)
Christine had confessed to her daughter what it had meant to give her body for twenty years to a man she hated. La-
vina, 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
to the confession her mother makes.

LAVINIA. (Trying to break away from her,
halting her hands up to her eyes) Stop
telling me such things! Let me go! (She breaks
away, shrinking from her mother with a look of
contemptuous, Affronted) You
—then you've always hated Father?

CHRISTINE. (Bitterly) No. I loved him once
—before I married him—Incredible as that
fact may be, 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
thought it was only right and proper.

LAVINIA. (Winning again—Stammers harsh-
ly) So I was born of your disgust! I've always
guessed that, Mother—ever since I was little—
used to come to you—wh Fle would
you love mel I've got to make
you love me now! I've got to make

"I'm sick of death. I want to live! Maybe
from thinking of what I've lost!"

She looks at her mother, as if to say, "You
ought to love me! You're only his revenge on Father!

"Then in a note of final desperate pleading,

"I thought about my life—lying awake night
—and about your life," he says. "In the mid-
dle of battle I'd think maybe in a minute I'll
be dead. But your life is 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."

"I realize 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 Vinny, but a daughter's not a wife. Then
I made up my mind to make 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 vileness 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 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 Mannnon to
please with his wife. Long ago the tragic
patterns of their lives were set. Chris-
tine has committed herself to Adam Brandt
and now she answers her hus-
band 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!"

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

Eugene O'Neill, Mourning Becomes Electra,
81-84.

In the sterility and the incestuous in-
sanity of Ezra Mannnon's children, the
revenge of the nurse girl finds its last
fulfillment. This revenge indeed was sure. There
was little need of Marie Brantome's son assuming
the part of active agent in her
revenge. The destruction of this house-
hold represents no triumph of external
forces. Its fall is one brought about by internal
decay. In Orin and Lavina, this deterioration is made complete.

When the daughter of the Mannons,
rejecting her lover, turns and
marches woodenly into the
great house, closing the door behind her, she
embraces the fate which brings the tradi-

81bid. Pp. 50-52.