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JOHN HOWARD LAWSON—THE EARLY YEARS

By Le Roy Robinson

Most historians of 20th century American drama discuss John Howard Lawson's dramas of the 1920's and 1930's. But there is hardly any discussion of his work before 1923, the year of his first Broadway production. This two-part article is the first published report on Lawson's early life (there is no biography of Lawson, and he has not published memoirs or autobiography), on his juvenilia and college writings, and on his first two professional productions in 1916. This report is factual, but it suggests, implicitly and explicitly, possible relationships between Lawson's early writings and some of his later, more substantial ones. All unpublished writings by John Howard Lawson referred to in both parts of this article are in the personal files of Mr. Lawson, who kindly permitted me to see them.

I

John Howard Lawson (named after the famous 18th century English prison reformer) was born in New York City on September 25, 1894, not 1895 as usually reported. At his birth, the Lawsons moved to New Rochelle on Long Island. His mother Belle Hart Lawson was interested in child education and child welfare. At one time she had a kindergarten in her home for her two older children, Wendell Holmes Lawson (b. 1887) and Adelaide Jaffery Lawson (b. 1889). She also started child study groups in the Ethical Culture...
Society. After a long illness in bed, she died in New Rochelle when John Howard Lawson was about five years old.

John Howard Lawson's father, Simeon Lawson, was Reuters News Agency's General Manager in the United States from 1892 to 1920, when he retired. His career as a journalist has been described in a letter to me (January 29, 1964) by B. W. Stockwell, then Personnel Director, Reuters Ltd., London. Simeon Lawson began his newspaper career with the Boston Herald in the 1870's. In 1880 he started the Mexican Financier, a business weekly published in Mexico City, where he was a foreign correspondent for several American newspapers and for Reuters. In 1886 he sold the Mexican Financier and he and his wife moved at her request to New York. He often visited London. He was well acquainted with both Baron Herbert and Baron George de Reuter, and he was always a welcome guest at the London home of Baron Julius Reuter, the founder of Reuters, with whom he had a personal relationship.

Simeon Lawson was a seeker for more than news. His daughter Adelaide Lawson Gaylor has written in a letter to me (December 17, 1963) that at one time he took his children to the Unitarian Church and at another time he joined the Church of Christ, Scientist. (In Nirvana (1926) John Howard Lawson develops a Christian Science theme: the power of faith over matter.) Simeon Lawson was interested in mysticism (as was John Howard Lawson until the mid-1930's). Simeon Lawson died around 1934 at the age of 83 or 84. His daughter remembers him as a "very sensitive" man, who, after his wife's death, "tried to be mother and father to his children."

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1 He legally changed his name from Levy to Lawson in the late 1880's, because of anti-semitism in the United States. He "specifically wanted to take his family to expensive summer hotels where Jews were not admitted." John Howard Lawson. Letter to me January 2, 1964.
Until his mother’s death, John Howard Lawson attended a private kindergarten in New Rochelle operated by people named Fern. After his mother’s death, he and his sister Adelaide boarded at the Halsted School, then a small private school, in Yonkers, New York. (Their father and brother lived in a nearby apartment.) The motto of the Halsted School was *Possunt quia, posse videntur*, They are able who think they are able\(^2\). John (“Jack”) and Adelaide (“Addie”) Lawson boarded at the Halsted School until he was about ten and she about 15 years old. The Lawson family then moved to New York City, living at the Chatsworth Apartments at 72nd Street and Riverside Drive.

Adelaide went to the Horace Mann School in New York City, and John went to the Cutler School, a private “prep” school in New York, where, besides preparing for college, he played hockey and basketball. As he has done all his life, he participated in public speaking activities: in a recitation contest on May 28, 1907 he won the Junior Class Second Prize for his recitation of “The Intrepid Bee.”

John Howard Lawson’s “Theatre Book,” an unpublished album or scrapbook, is a collection of programs of cultural events that he attended in New York as an adolescent. These programs give a good impression of his interests from the time he was about 11 to the time he was about 14 years old.

He went to the theater very often. During the theatrical seasons of 1905-06, 1906-07 and 1907-08, he went to the Deutsches Theater to see *Wilhelm Tell* and *Gotz von Berlichingen*. He saw Maude Adams in *Peter Pan*, Richard Mansfield in *King Richard III*, Henry

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Irving in *Markheim* and *Charles the First*, Forbes-Robertson and Gertrude Elliott in *Caesar and Cleopatra*, E. H. Sothern in *Hamlet*, and E. H. Sothern and Julia Marlowe in *Twelfth Night*. He saw many other famous actors and actresses in other serious dramas, including Augustus Thomas’s *The Witching Hour*. He saw James Mac Arthur’s musical adaptation from John Bunyan, *The Christian Pilgrim*, whose theme is “All the powers of Hell/Cannot a righteous man prevail.” He saw Richard Mansfield in *Peer Gynt*, whose program note is like a short description of Lawson’s future experimental dramas:

> This Phantasmagoria, or comedy of human life, embraces all the elements of the serious, the pathetic, the tragic, the grotesque, the real and the unreal, the actualities and the dreams, the facts and the consequences, the ambitions and the disappointments, the hopes and the disillusions, and the dread and the terror and the resurrection in love of the human soul.

As a young boy, John Howard Lawson attended concerts of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He went to the Metropolitan Opera House for *Siegfried* and *Lohengrin*, and to the Manhattan Opera House for *Carmen* and Mary Garden’s *Thais* and *Louise*. He went to piano and organ recitals. For example, on February 28, 1907, he attended an organ recital given by Samuel A. Baldwin at St. Paul’s Chapel, Columbia University. Baldwin played a sonata by Julius Reubke based upon the 94th Psalm: “Lord, how long shall the wicked triumph?”

John Howard Lawson has said that he “haunted” art galleries when he was in his early teens. At the Ehrich he saw 18th Century French Art and Early American Art. At the Montross he saw a Water Color and Pastel Exhibition by Childe Hassam and John La
Farge. At the Macbeth he saw the first largescale showing of the so-called Ashcan School of American painters. In the Grand Ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel he attended an auction of paintings, and kept a record of the opening bids and final selling prices. He attended lectures on art.

As a young boy, John Howard Lawson was also interested in more popular culture. He watched drills and exercises by the Drum and Bugle Corps of the Kyle Institute at Flushing, Long Island. He saw a National Motor Boat and Sportsman’s Show at Madison Square Garden. He watched water sports and swimming races. He watched “prep” teams compete in track and field events.

As all of this suggests, the Lawson family was, as his sister writes, “comfortably well off”, and in the summers they took vacation trips to resort hotels. In 1906, when John Howard Lawson was not quite 12, the family went to Europe for the summer, visiting relatives in London for a month and then touring on the continent. The family was accompanied by Mary Sicard Jenkins, the principal of the Halsted School. In a letter to me (July 7, 1977), a former “Halsted Girl” Susan Brown Johannesen (see #2 below) who knew Miss Jenkins for many years but “never knew of her connection with the Lawsons,” describes her as “a very educated & well read & informed person... She was an Episcopalian... She had very high standards of conduct and ethics.”

John Howard Lawson had been reading books “far beyond his years,” probably history, philosophy, the classics, -- and had been trying his own hand at writing. (According to his sister, he had attempted verse drama at the age of eight or nine.) In the summer of 1906 he kept a daily journal (unpublished) of “Places Visited in the Summer of 1906 While Traveling in Europe.” This
journal, kept regularly in England, France, Germany, Holland and Switzerland, is valuable as a source-book for influences on the would-be author making a firsthand discovery of the visible European high culture of the past: colleges, libraries, museums, galleries, castles, palaces, churches, cathedrals, mausoleums. On July 6, 1906, he visited the Royal Palace, Charlottenburgh, Germany, to see Frederick III’s mausoleum: “It is a very wierd /sic/ place because a blue light comes through the window” -- an early instance of his attention to lighting effects, an important aspect of his work in the theater.

On July 11, 1906, he went to the Dresden Gallery of Art, where he saw a Holbein Madonna, a Murillo Madonna and a Rafael Madonna (Madonna di San Sisto), which he called the latter’s “finest work.” On July 12th, he saw Rafael’s Madonna again: “I like it better every time I see it.” On July 13th, he saw Rafael’s Madonna again: “I even think it is the finest picture I have ever seen.”

(Another sourcebook is a second unpublished travel journal, “New York to San Francisco and Return. Sights on the Way.” The entries in this journal date from June 21, 1909 to July 20, 1909, when Lawson was about 15. Descriptive passages indicate that he was making an effort at style:

June 21... The majestic, dark calm mountains were very beautiful against the soft glow of the twilight.

June 25. ... Against the clear, transparent blue of the sky, first flashing out in a golden fire, then, as the sun rested on the edge of the distant hills, growing into a deep red disk, then the whole sky flaming into scarlet which became gradually deadened into pink, then into a rosy grey, and at last into a cold beautiful twilight, which while it took the warmth out of the rolling landscape, still contrasted grandly with the dark brownish green shading of the hills, or the greyish yellow of the occasional wheat fields. But this was
not yet the end. The darkness of the night, with its infinite
grandeur and soft unfathomed depth crept on, adding to
the scene a touch of wonder, mystery, sweetness and soft­
ness.

Similar twilights appear in some of Lawson’s future dramas.)

An impression of John Howard Lawson’s literary ventures as a
boy of 13 or 14 emerges from his hard-to-read left-handed scrawl in
unpublished notebooks of that period. He was interested in great
men as subjects of dramatization. There are undated notes for a
play entitled “The Barbarian” or “Theodoric the Great.” There are
undated notes for a play entitled “Henry the Fourth” (“A Drama of
the early struggles of church and state.”) There is an unfinished
verse drama, dated November 9, 1908, entitled “Charlemagne” or
“Carolus Augustus.” The notes for this drama, “Ideas in Carolus
Augustus,” indicate that each idea is intended to be represented in
one scene of the 14 projected scenes:

1. The Nation as an individuality...
3. The State as representing freedom...
4. The Church as representing absolutism and the
   unknown...
6. The growth of the principle of imperialism
   represented in Charles...

The notes on the characters of “Charlemagne” provide for Char­
lemagne to be wise without being brave, for another to be brave
without being wise, for another to possess insight without devotion,
and for another to possess devotion without insight. This balancing
is rhetorical but there is also subtlety in the conception noted on a
page related to “Charlemagne” that “Complexity is the law of life.”
Undated notebooks (“Dramatic Notes”) of about the same period
contain perceptive comments on many Elizabethan dramas and
masques, In one of these notebooks Lawson says that in Magico
Prodigioso "Lucifer is a fine character." (In Nirvana a Lawson character says, "Up with the Devil!")

The only completed pre-college drama of John Howard Lawson's that I have read is an unpublished five-act verse drama, dated January 22, 1908 — November 1, 1908, entitled "Savitri" ("A Mythical, Romantic Drama of Mythological India, Founded on Edwin Arnold's Poem of Savitri, one of his Indian Idylls.") Savitri is a princess who has to find a worthy husband, a man with "a hand of iron. But a heart both soft and loving."

For is she not the chosen
Of the goddess who is beauty,
Of the great and high Savitri?
She who pitieth the sorrowing
And giveth water to the dying.

After a long search Savitri finds one man, a prince, that she can love. She learns from a prophet that it is the destiny of this prince to die within a year, but she rejects the attempt of her father the king to dissuade her from marrying the doomed prince, saying, "I do praise the love eternal." Eventually, Savitri confronts the "intangible shadow" that is Yama the Destroyer, or Death. She pleads with Yama to free her husband the prince from a fate "decided millions of years ago" or to permit her to die with him. She says, "I fear you not, oh Death." Yama lets her husband live. The main theme of the drama is "One good soul can break all decrees."

In September 1910 John Howard Lawson entered Williams College, a private liberal arts college, as the youngest man in his class. A former classmate of Lawson's at Williams who requests anonymity describes Lawson at that time as a "rather quiet type and perhaps a bit shy." This classmate recalls that Lawson once commented that
at Williams "the life outside the classroom was more interesting than anything concerned with studies." The Williams College Senior Class Book of 1914 (SCB) reports that Lawson, who majored in English, treated the curriculum with "nonchalance" and notes that in comparison the curriculum treated him in an "excellent way...in the matter of marks" -- 11 B's, 21 C's, and 6 D's, in unspecified courses.

John Howard Lawson's "nonchalance" toward the curriculum did not extend to extra-curricular activities. SCB reports that Lawson at once "sprang into prominence." He was the first man of his class to have anything published in the Williams Literary Monthly (WLM) and he "contributed steadily to that publication all through his four years, serving also as a member of the board."

SCB records other examples of Lawson's extra-curricular activities. He wrote the words to the class song of the Class of 1914, "Williams, Forever Williams"3):

Williams, forever Williams,
We sing to thee
With shouts of comrade voices,
With cheers and jollity,
Good fellows
Always with song and laughter,
Always light-hearted glee;
Tho' years bring sorrow after,
Now let us take our fill of pleasure,
And days of friendship treasure,
Within thy bonds, Williams.

He contributed to The Purple Cow, Williams student humor magazine, to which contributions were anonymous. He ran a very close race for the editorship of the Williams Record, the student newspaper.

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He served on the board of and contributed to the 1914 *Gulielmensian*, the college yearbook published (contributions anonymous) by the junior class. He was elected Class Poet. He was a member of the Good Government Club, the Classical Society, the Socialist Club, and Pipe and Quill. Although he was not a member of any fraternity at Williams, he and a few other "barbs" banded together under the name of "Swithe Blithe"— in Anglo-Saxon, "exceedingly joyful."

At Williams, Lawson spent a lot of energy in public speaking. (I have consulted the *Record* for only his senior year.) On March 12, 1914, he was a member of the Williams debating team which competed unsuccessfully against Dartmouth at Williams. The Williams team took the negative on "Resolved: that the Federal Government should require compulsory arbitration of labor disputes on interstate railroads." On the evening of March 23, 1914, he reviewed for the Classical Society Dr. Frank Frost Abbott's *The Common People of Ancient Rome*. (In the preface of this book, Abbott says: "We are interested in the common people of Rome because they made the Roman empire what it was.") Lawson also competed in the Van Vechten Prize Contest for extemporaneous speaking. Once he spoke about the Panama Canal Toll question and explained the importance of the policy of Pan-Americanism. On other days in the Van Vechten Prize Contest, which continued over several Mondays in the Spring of 1914, he spoke on "The Capture of Torreon — Its Significance," and on "the small college versus the university for undergraduate study," contending that "the salvation of the small college lies in the development of the cultural courses and the creation of an appreciation of the 'beautiful and gracious'." Another time in the Van Vechten Contest he offered suggestions to ameliorate labor strife in the coal mines of Colorado. (In *Processional* (1925), *The International* (1928),
Marching Song (1937), and Thunder Morning (1953, unpublished) Lawson deals with the theme of labor strife.)

Early in May 1914 Lawson addressed the Socialist Study Department of the Good Government Club on "Will Socialism be an adequate remedy for the evils of the present capitalistic system?" The Record (May 9, 1914, p. 2) reports his indictment of capitalism as being theoretically and practically unsound, wasteful and outgrown, unsuited to the needs of the time.

Lawson himself had not quite outgrown capitalistic culture, however, and, as SCB reports, in his final year at Williams he "suddenly developed business genius" and achieved "audacious success" with a tutoring bureau and "various other schemes." SCB notes that "achievement comes easy" for Lawson and sums up the "keynotes" of his character as "cheerfulness and optimism, combined with a great willingness to oblige." In a letter to me (December 2, 1963) Carl J. Austrian, a former classmate who roomed near Lawson for a couple of years at Williams, writes that he still remembers Lawson as "very bright, alert, kind and considerate. He had an excellent sense of humor and a bright cheery face." Durand H. Van Doren, another former classmate of Lawson's at Williams, thinks that SCB's summary of Lawson's character is a "very good one," and in a letter to me (December 15, 1963) he writes:

> Despite the great difference in our economic philosophies and separation for the better part of fifty years... I have never lost my affection for him; and I think that when he is not theorizing or lecturing, he is much the same cheerful, agreeable chap he always was.

The day he graduated from Williams College, June 24, 1914, John Howard Lawson was, according to SCB, 19 years, eight months and thirty days old. He was 5' 8" tall, and he weighed 139 pounds.
He was active right up to graduation, and on June 22, 1914, delivered an essay in the Graves Prize Contest on "The Poetry of Alfred Noyes." Two days before the graduation ceremony John Howard Lawson attended Williams College President Harry Augustus Garfield's Baccalaureate Sermon. Garfield's text, taken from Second Corinthians 4:18, was "For the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are unseen are eternal." To the Class of 1914 Garfield said: "Gentlemen, your lives will count. Look up until you behold the vision of your country and then seek to transform its temporal concerns accordingly." (John Howard Lawson has devoted most of his career as playwright and screenwriter, critic and historian, seeking to transform the temporal concerns of his country.)

John Howard Lawson's writings in WLM include eight poems, one short story, seven essays, five articles, two "Chats" and three "Shears" reviews of writing in student publications of other colleges. (In his "Shears" of March 1914 Lawson "likes" but does not name a story in *The Vassar Miscellany*.. "a psychological study of a country girl who comes to New York and makes a success in theatrical life." (See *The Pure in Heart* (1934).) At Williams, in his senior year, he also wrote in verse *A Hindoo Love Drama*, and *Standards* (1916).

A reading of the poems indicates that at 17 or 18 John Howard Lawson as a poet was one of the "defenders of ideality." The images in these poems of 1910—1912 influenced by Sir Edwin Arnold's "The Song Celestial" are images of "fantastic fairy forms" and "phantom visions," of "mystic measures," of "fiery angels of the dawn," of "the thrill of holy passion" and "quenchless hopes and yearnings." These images (variations of which appear in some of Lawson's professional dramas) seem derived from theosophy and/or the genteel tradition, but the poems suggest a certain questioning of genteel
tradition values, particularly as regards "secret things," namely passion. The poems express an idealistic conception of the all-importance of love "which scatters all your homilies" (as in "Savitri"), but there is also an image of blighted Eden ("We have sunk from angel glories to the pettiness of ghouls") suggesting that the innocence of youth is qualified by knowledge of social restraints upon passion and perhaps even by experience of personal guilt. There is defiance of the guilt-inducing order ("And we tamper with the secret things of Hell and Paradise") and there is questioning of that order's intellectual basis ("And we cast aside the ignorance that fell with Eden's curse"). There is a suggestion of fatalism ("History's finished span.../written.../Before the mighty space of mortal time began"'), but there is an emphasis on the possibility of escape from fatalism:

Some men are born to waste their lives in prayer, to bend in tears
Like cowering figures graven in the marble of a tomb—
But I, I am unconquerable of chance, of death, or doom.

The young Lawson must have read W. E. Henley's "Invictus" and may have read Jeanette Gilder's "My Creed": "I do not fear to...stand before the living God." He says that he despises Fate. He expresses pride in his aloneness:

When stars are quenched like candles, and the final doom is born,
When worlds and suns are splintered, rent, like playthings that are worn—
And men and angels trembling low before the Judgement Throne;
Even before the living God, my soul shall stand alone.

(A similar apocalyptic feeling is expressed in several of Lawson's professional dramas.)

Lawson apparently stopped writing lyrics of this particular kind
after 1912. At any rate, he abandoned the world of ideality for his next contributions to WLM. Besides, in an essay called “Idealism,” he had already emphasized another aspect of idealism:

We are still trying to transform facts into hope, dead actualities into living longings. Indeed, that is the great business of life: to idealize realities, and to realize ideals.

John Howard Lawson’s “Current Topics” and “Current Events” writings in WLM in 1912—13 show that the precocious 18-year-old journalist is a Wilsonian progressive whose main political interest is in foreign affairs. In his first “Current Topics,” Lawson takes up two problems of the pre-World War I period. 1) About the Balkans, he admits that the daily changes there are “kaleidoscopic,” that information is often contradictory and that accurate judgment is almost impossible; but, after a discussion of the political balance of power then prevailing in Europe, he concludes that there is “imminence of a general European conflagration.” (In The International he suggests the imminence of a second general European “conflagration.”) 2) About “The Chinese Loan,” he gives a detailed account of the operations of various groups of international bankers competing for a monopoly on all loans to the new Chinese government. He sums up: “China seems destined to the financial control of the grasping continental powers.” He doubts that the participation of American financial interests in the Six Power Monopoly can be reconciled with the United States government’s “open door” policy. (In Standards and The International he develops the theme of grasping international bankers.)

In his first “Current Events,” Lawson writes on “Panama Canal Tolls.” President Taft had issued a proclamation fixing tolls for foreign shipping entering the Panama Canal. There remained open
the question whether American coastwise shipping was exempt from the payment of tolls. Lawson points out that, according to the Hay-Paunceforte Treaty, American shipping was not exempt, and he supposes Great Britain will protest this "discrimination" and take the case to the Hague Court for arbitration. In his second "Current Events," Lawson discusses "Home Rule for Ireland." He says that the British Home Rule Bill is "internationally significant," because "It is the first step in the inauguration of a change in the system of controlling the British Empire." He explains the system now known as indirect rule and says:

It is becoming more and more obvious that the empire can no longer exist as a highly centralized and centrally governed collection of nations.

In his third "Current Events," Lawson writes about "Dollar Diplomacy." He says that President Taft's administration has developed a foreign policy based upon "dollar diplomacy" and

has put the diplomatic transactions of the United States upon a frankly commercial basis, to subordinate idealistic or broadly patriotic motives to matters of material importance such as the securing of contracts for American firms, arranging for participation of American bankers in foreign loans, and for the exploitation of Central and South American resources by American financiers.

Lawson hopes that Woodrow Wilson, the Democratic president-elect, who had run on a platform of "anti-imperialism and colonial exploitation," would somehow modify "dollar diplomacy" and make of it a "less grasping character." In his fourth "Current Events," Lawson discusses "Disturbances in Mexico." He reviews the events of the recent revolution, events happening with "startling rapidity." As he does in Processional and Loudspeaker (1927), he criticises the American press "full of so many strange rumors and unbelievable stories...
that it is almost impossible to form any calm, clear judgment of the actual causes and inner details of the situation.” He strongly opposes American intervention. In his fifth and last “Current Events,” Lawson (elected to the board of WLM) concludes his college articles dealing with political-economic matters with a discussion of “The Chinese Republic,” which he says is the “prey” of “grasping” European powers. Lawson describes the situation in Mongolia and Thibetl[sic] as the result of a conflict between competing imperialists, British, Russian, Japanese and American. (He again deals with this theme in The International.) He adds that the United States with its “cold reserve” is giving “tacit acquiescence” to the “predatory actions” of the European powers. Again he invests a hope in president-elect Wilson. (Again to be disappointed.)

In WLM in 1913—14 John Howard Lawson also wrote about art, movies, the theater and vaudeville. In “Art for Cube’s Sake,” "he defends cubism, futurism, impressionism. (He had just seen the world-famous Post-Impressionist Show.) He says that Cubism does not conform to accepted technical standards but the Cubist has standards of his own. The Cubist does not attempt photographic representation but tries to interpret life and give it more spiritual significance from the fullness of his own personality. Lawson identifies himself with this new movement in art:

We base the wildest sublimities of our artistic imaginations upon the calculations of science. We go mad according to rule; we see visions and dream dreams by mathematical principles... Let us look forward... to that distant day when all art shall have further elevated to the mystic realm of the Fourth Dimension.

(Lawson develops the theme of the Fourth Dimension in Nirvana.) In “The Movies,” he discusses some of the artistic possibilities of a
motion picture: "sudden shift and contrast, variety of time and place, breadth of horizon, multitude of impressions" -- possibilities that Lawson later used in his own experimental dramas (and in his own film writing). He predicts that the movies will someday have their classics. In "The Temperamental Journey," he reviews a David Belasco stage production and he sets forth certain principles of the drama:

The essence of true art is suggestion... A realistic setting is distracting... Let the scenery be soft and subdued, twilit and unobtrusive. Let the background suggest an emotional state corresponding to that of the play -- nothing more. The scenery for intense love should be a curtain of dark, passionate red...

In "The Oriental Drama," he reviews two dramas that he has recently seen, *A Thousand Years Ago* and *Omar the Tentmaker*. He says that "an atmosphere of romance pervaded them," and he denies that romance is "childish simplicity" or "senile sentimentality." In "Local Vaudeville," Lawson says that it is strange that "in a time when originality is a byword in all walks of life... such a prominent phase of our national entertainment should be characterized by its remarkable lack of newness." (In his preface to *Processional* (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1925. v.) Lawson says:

I have endeavored to create a method which shall express the American scene in native idiom... this new technique is essentially vaudevillesque in character -- a development, a moulding... of the rich vitality of the two-a-day and the musical extravaganza.)

The one short story that Lawson published in WLM in 1913 is "The Wrong Cue," the story of an actor on the verge of a nervous breakdown; in a kind of trance, "he did not stop acting..." (Bill Weed in *Nirvana* says that he is "always acting.") The setting
of the story is a church: "The faint smell of incense pervaded the musty edifice... the place seemed foreign, mysterious, uncanny--like the hidden interior of a sealed and forgotten catacomb." The actor comes out of his trance when he falls on his knees before a statue of the Virgin Mary. One of John Howard Lawson's most ambitious works at Williams College was _A Hindoo Love Drama_, "Narrating the Mythical Adventures of Nala and Damayanti, based in part upon Ancient Hindoo poems," namely the _Mahabharata_ as translated by Edwin Arnold. Lawson has written in a letter to me (January 2, 1964) that this verse drama was shown by a dramatists' agent to actors Otis Skinner and E. H. Sothern and Julia Marlowe, but it was neither produced nor published. _A Hindoo Love Story_, an episodic drama, has a prologue, five acts (eight scenes), and an epilogue. The six settings include a palace garden, a king's alcove, a grand ballroom, a harem, a forest glade, and a campsite of a nomad tribe in Central India. The settings are suggestive rather than realistic. In the prologue, a middle-aged rajah whose heart burns with a "sick desire" wants his Minstrel's help for the "weariness and pain/That eats my spirit." The Minstrel sings a song of cheer, which is the love drama that follows--a song of "love that struggled in the net of Fate" a hundred years before. (Lawson uses the image of the net of Fate in _Roger Bloomer_ (1923) and in other dramas.) Before the Minstrel sings, six dancing girls do a "strange and mysterious measure, growing wilder and wilder." (These dancers re-appear in _The International_.)

Nala and Damayanti, a handsome young king and a beautiful young queen, enjoy perfect happiness. However, Pushkara, the king's brother, covets his brother's wife. (This theme reappears in _Parlor Magic_ (1962).) Pushkara consults an evil magician who
arranges for Pushkara to deceive his brother the king. The magician bewitches the king, who, in a trance, gambles away, with “demon-driven dice,” his crown and his queen. When he awakens from his trance, the king asks for a chance to regain his losses. To do so, he must solve a certain riddle within 40 days. He sets out to find the answer. Meanwhile, the queen follows the advice of a lady-in-waiting and “guilelessly” inflames the passion of the king’s brother, who, expecting to conquer the queen, tells her the answer to the riddle. The queen then escapes from the palace to look for the king. The queen is lost in a forest of “strangely twisted and distorted” trees.” She is found by savage tribesmen who at first consider her a goddess. When they realize that the queen is not a goddess, they prepare her as a human sacrifice to their Tiger-God. Then, the king comes into the camp of the tribe and tells the riddle to a barbarian priest:

What is that light that darkness cannot quell,
More pure than moons and fiercer than the sun
In its first golden radiancy of rising —
What is that light so all-surpassing, Tell?4)

The queen hears the king’s voice and rushes to him with the answer to the riddle: “Love, flaming bright, unconquered, death-despising.” The king saves the queen, returns to the palace on the 40th day, demands his rightful throne and crown. To get them he kills his brother in combat. (In Edwin Arnold’s translation of Nala and Damayanti the bad brother is exiled.) In the epilogue, the minstrel sings that the king and queen lived happily ever after with “flame of white fire in their secret hearts,/More pure than moons and

4) This riddle and the answer to it echo Shelley’s Magico Prodigioso, Scene III: A Voice: "What is the glory far above All else in human life? All: Love! love!"
fiercer than the sun -- Unconquered, death-despising." (Lawson uses the same expression "death-despising" in *The Pure in Heart* in a scene in which two young lovers die together.) In a letter to me (January 2, 1964) Lawson notes: "Two young people dying on a New York roof-top because they are rebels without a cause is not the same as the happy outcome of the love story of Nala and Damayanti."

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The juvenilia and college writings of John Howard Lawson are of little aesthetic importance in themselves, but they are of biographical and historical interest when considered in relation to Lawson's subsequent writings and his career in general. They show how early most of the major interests of the man are established: theater, art, literature, the cinema, politics -- and they already express some of the main themes of Lawson's dramas. In these juvenilia and college writings there is an evident though not absolute contrast between the mysticism of the lyrics and the romanticism of the verse dramas and the comparative preciseness of the prose, e. g., the college articles on politics. There is a contrast between the idealistic and the pragmatic, but this is not necessarily a clash; the articles are analytical, but their underlying values are consistent with those espoused in the theosophical publications, e. g., *The Theosophic Messenger,* that Lawson has told me he read when he was a boy.⁵

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⁵ E. g., "...we in the Theosophical Society are all socialists, with our first object of the Universal Brotherhood of man 'without distinction of creed, sex, caste or color'." C. Jinarajadasa, "Socialism and the Coming Christ," *The Theosophic Messenger,* Vol. XII, October 1910, p. 779. Lawson may not have read this particular article; I am merely using it as an example. Theosophist Annie Besant, whose *The Ancient Wisdom* (1897) Lawson read when he was quite young, was a socialist early in her career; see her *Essays on Socialism.* London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1887.