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<th>JOHN HOWARD LAWSON'S UNPUBLISHED NIRVANA</th>
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In the 1920's John Howard Lawson had five plays produced on Broadway: *Roger Bloomer* (1923), *Processional* (1925), *Nirvana* (1926), *Loud Speaker* (1927), and *The International* (1928). Of these, only *Nirvana* was not published. Historians of American drama mention it only in passing: even the fullest discussion of Lawson's dramas contains only two sentences about *Nirvana*, one quoted from a contemporary review of the play. The only available summary that I know of (besides those more fragmentary ones that appeared in the reviews of the time) is that published by Burns Mantle, which does not even mention Bill Weed, one of the main characters of the play.

In any case, because *Nirvana* has not been published, there is a blank in the present history of Lawson's Broadway career, and there is a blank in the history of the American theater. The purpose of

1) It was produced by Noble-Ryan-Livy, Inc., at the Greenwich Village Theatre, New York, March 3, 1926, for less than a week. (The play was closed despite good attendance because of the financial collapse of its producers.) Francis I. Brentano of Brentano Publishers attended the opening night and the next day sent a letter to Lawson asking whether *Nirvana* was "available for publication." One can assume that Lawson answered in the affirmative because on March 8, 1926, he wrote in a letter to drama critic Gilbert W. Gabriel, a former classmate of his at Williams College, that he "expected the book out in another month."


This summary is to provide the basic material for filling those blanks. This summary is the first full description of Nirvana to be published, a description based upon John Howard Lawson's manuscript, copyrighted August 1925, which he kindly permitted me to read.

Nirvana's action (mostly intellectual, theological, psychological) begins in a weirdly scientific setting:

There are all sorts of lighting and electrical apparatus: Alpine ray, x-ray, rhythmic current generator, high frequency generator, fluoroscope, galvanic table for electric control, the complete machinery for giving and relieving pain.

"On the dark stage the violet light of an x-ray apparatus buzzes startlingly for a few moments of noisy explosion."

In his tall white room (whose gothic arch "gives almost a church-like suggestion") Dr. Weed is experimenting in the electric function of the motor nerves on guinea pigs, animal and human. His Catholic nurse says it is horrible to cut up bodies, even those of guinea pigs. Dr. Weed agrees, but, he says, "viewed in a certain light, conditions of life are so horrible it doesn't pay to be shocked."

His nurse believes heaven and hell are real places; she worries about what the people who in life are mangled will do on the day of the last trumpet and the assembling of bones. Dr. Weed is not overly concerned with the after-life, but he does wonder from time to time whether "we could find eternity by a scientific formula."

Dr. Weed's musings are interrupted by the entrance of his novelist brother Bill Weed, who "wants out" of experiments being made on him to test the beneficence of "electric sleep." Dr. Weed changes the conversation. He asks his brother Bill not to make love to the nurse (he is joking about this) because "it disorganizes the office" (he is not joking about this). Dr. Weed's attitude toward sex is that the
sex act is "no more important than shaking hands and generally not so cordial." As for love, Dr. Weed says it is a romantic notion that love is "all of life."

Bill Weed says he wants to "live quietly and do his work" as a novelist, but he admits he "can't control things." Bill's particular lack of control is expressed by his sexual behavior. He is constantly promiscuous, frequently an adulterer. He asks: "Why can't people do as they like?" (Dr. Weed asserts that "no one knows what he likes.") Bill says he is flippant "because I don't dare be any other way." On the one hand, Bill has faith that the "idea of a pure inclusive love is the only worthwhile thing," and he says: "How honest I could be if I found a woman who had the same faith I have." On the other hand,

I can't tell you what I really feel. I'm out of the habit of sincerity; perhaps there's something beyond love, perhaps there's even a God... If there were a religious faith which really satisfied our modern needs, that would be a great thing; the trouble is I can't quite believe anything, like most of us nowadays, I'm out of kilter... can't find any balance in life.4)

Bill claims he is too highly sexed and intellectually disorganized. He continues his self-examination:

I want to genuinely create, being unable to, I write bunk and get myself personally entangled in an abortive effort to be something. I believe passionately in honesty and I spend all my life lying.

Mr. Holz enters. A financier, he also wants "peace and quiet." He wishes he could buy it with one million of the dollars which, 4) Bill Weed is perplexed by many of the same problems that perplex Quentin in Arthur Miller's After the Fall (1964). See John Howard Lawson's "Arthur Miller and the Fall of Man," American Dialog. Vol. 1. No. 1. July-August 1964. pp. 13—16
according to the stage directions, he made selling opium and buying mining concessions in the “East” (Asia). Mr. Holz helps Dr. Weed out once in a while with money. He is now seeking an investment for philanthropic purposes: he wants to help people *en masse*. However, when Dr. Weed suggests that Mr. Holz finance his current experiments in the electric function of the motor nerves, Mr. Holz refuses to do so. For him, this experiment is insufficiently sensational. He says he “would pay anything to save humanity — sensationally.” (Dr. Weed comments with sardonic aplomb: “That’s the modern idea.”)

Dr. Weed mentions other experiments Mr. Holz can finance, e.g., antedating *Brave New World* (1933), the “ectogenesis” experiment in producing both male and female at the same time in a vat. Dr. Weed says that “artificial sex production has to come,” to which Mr. Holz “oily” replies: “But the old way was so nice.” ⁵ According to Dr. Weed, the “old way” of sexual reproduction was nice but “wasteful,” and he predicts the future production of babies by a scientific formula.

Mr. Holz does not interest himself in this prediction. In fact, he wants to send the then current 1926 surplus population of the earth to the planet Mars. He believes in the “impossible.” He decides to finance a man in the Bronx who is experimenting with space rockets ⁶. “We must explore.”

Janet Galt enters. She announces she is “hilariously unhappy.” She is “always hysterical” with people whom she likes. She wishes
Dr. Weed could put a “new soul” in her husband. Dr. Weed is “sick of people worrying about their souls.” He believes the practice of medicine is being obstructed by people’s inner lives. As for Mrs. Galt, Dr. Weed says: “You’re really suffering and you don’t dare admit it.” Dr. Weed says she needs to be “cleaned out by some real experience,” unspecified. Mrs. Galt, who says she possesses the “foible” of intellectual honesty, admits she is having a “vulgar intrigue” with Bill Weed, “who makes love to every woman he meets.” Bill says he cannot help his character’s being what it is. Although Mrs. Galt thinks Bill’s so-called character nonexistent, she questions his easy self-acceptance only vaguely: “Isn’t there any social code or law to which we can cling to save ourselves from being fools?” She recognizes there is no escape from what ails her: in travel, say, she and Bill would find themselves “at the end of the race” the “same selves.” She says: “Romance is dead.” Dr. Weed concurs: “None of us cares for anything except a mild degree of physical satisfaction.”

Bill Weed also concurs: “For an intelligent man there’s nothing genuine to believe in, no lost cause to fight for anymore.” At the word “fight,” Dr. Weed makes another prediction:

7) Lawson deals with this travel theme earlier in Roger Bloomer: Louise Chamberlain and Roger imagine traveling but realize that they cannot really travel; in Processional: the flippant newspaperman travels to many different places, always to be his same self; later in Loud Speaker: the newspaperman and the politician’s daughter discover that even in a gaily lanterned Chinese junk they are still their frustrated selves; in Marching Song (1937): Rose explains to her boy friend that there is no place to escape to; in Parlor Magic (1962): Abigail finds in parties in Europe no escape from her problems.
In twenty years, the United States will enter the most destructive war in history. Isn’t that something to prevent by all the will and nerve you’ve got? 8)

Bill Weed answers: “It’s hopeless.” Dr. Weed says Bill is suffering like many other people from a “loss of nerve,” but a “man’s will can do anything”: “If God is dead, make a new God.”

At that moment the aunt of the Weed brothers arrives from New England with their young cousin Priscilla. Dr. Weed assumes at once that Priscilla needs an abortion. (She does not.) At her embarrassment, Dr. Weed, not at all embarrassed, says: “Shame is the lowest vice there is.”

Aunt Bertha looks around the laboratory of what she calls “useless apparatus of materia medica” with scorn. A Christian Scientist, Aunt Bertha has little patience with doctors who “reduce the Kingdom of Heaven to germs and bugs.” She says she tries to “tune in more and more on infinite thought.” She thinks a “pure enough woman” could, like a “pure woman did once in a certain stable,” could tune in on infinity “till Death itself shall bow.”

Bill, his heart a “burnt out cinder,” pursues Priscilla. He reminds her that when he had left home she kissed him goodbye “in the apple orchard in the middle of a red sunset.” 9) Bill tells Priscilla she is for him the “symbol of an impossible idea” -- his ideal of a “pure inclusive love.”

Dr. Weed intrudes with a joke: Bill has a “nervous disorder” that causes him to make love to every woman he meets. Priscilla’s

8) In “Current Topics” (Williams College Monthly, November 1912) Lawson predicts World War I. In The International he repeats Nirvana’s prediction of World War II. In Parlor Magic his characters pledge will and nerve to prevent World War III.

9) In Roger Bloomer Louise Chamberlain waves goodbye to Roger as the red sun sets.
New England puritanism has not prepared her for cosmopolitan sophistication that defines promiscuity as a nervous disorder. She leaves. Bill asks: “Why do I find myself making love to two women, for neither of whom I care a damn?” He agrees it is because of his “nerves,” which are reaching a “breaking point.” Dr. Weed says: “The sooner the better.”

Mrs. Galt then returns and reports, casually, the husband she and Bill have cuckolded has committed suicide. (The Catholic nurse considers Mrs. Galt “indecent” because Mrs. Galt does not cry.) Dr. Weed, also casually, arranges for the notification of the coroner, the filling of official documents, with remarkable efficiency.

Mrs Galt says her husband was worried about the static coming over his radio and before he killed himself (she does not say how), he said “there was bad magic in the air.” To this suicide’s spirit, Mrs. Galt calls:

If I dance on an open grave for you tonight you’ll know what I mean dressed in the gaiety of despair till I stand naked in the land of no man’s imagination...

At this speech -- as occurs in many of Lawson’s plays at heightened moments, “Music suddenly breaks in a great blare of broken chords.” Mrs. Galt again calls to the suicide’s spirit:

Don’t you wish you’d died trying to pick the static out of the air?

10) In *Success Story* (1932) Agnes efficiently arranges that her husband’s accidental murder seem a suicide.

The first act of *Nirvana* ends on this enigmatic note¹²).

* * *

The action of the second act of *Nirvana* takes place in Dr. Weed's roof garden, decorated with flowers and plants and Japanese lanterns. The lanterns light up the roof garden, from which one sees the deep blue of the sky dotted with the fairy lights of the Manhattan sky-line, red and green of shining advertisements, gold of lighted buildings... the more distant silver of scattered stars.

This setting is seen through a frame of steel bars and girders rising up high toward the proscenium arch at front, through which blink the lanterns and stars as through the black bars of a foreboding but unfinished prison.

A waltz is being played. Caricaturized people in evening dress dance and walk about in an "aimless fashion." A Man with a drink in one hand laughs, and he and a Girl suddenly kiss with intensity. He does not know the Girl. Neither does Dr. Weed, to whose parties often come uninvited men and women. Dr. Weed is a permissive host: "Do anything you like."¹³)

¹²) Much of the obscurity of *Nirvana* is elucidated if one reads H. P. Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), Annie Besant's *The Ancient Wisdom* (1897), and, among other books of mysticism particularly P. D. Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum*. (The Third Canon of Thought. A Key to the Enigmas of the World.) New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1947. Third American Edition, Authorized and Revised. Lawson was reading the first edition of this book (1922) before he began writing *Nirvana*. Lawson was also reading Pascal: "We sail within a vast sphere, ever drifting in uncertainty, driven from end to end... Nothing stays for us. This is our natural condition and yet most contrary to our inclination. We burn with desire to find solid ground and an infinite sure foundation whereon to build a truer reaching to the Infininite. But our whole groundwork cracks; and the earth opens to abysses."

¹³) In *Standards* (1916) the Cabaret Dancer has the same slogan.
This slogan appeals to the Red-Haired Girl, a "wench with a tenor voice and mannish clothes," who dances intimately with the just-kissed Girl, who is "Spanish by a dear friend of her father's"—and to the Effeminate Man, who walks off arm-in-arm with the Thick-Necked Man. At this party, the stage directions say,

people pass and drink in the lost and hectic manner of persons trying to enjoy themselves with desperate ill-success.

Mrs. Galt, however, is waiting for "some strange voice" that "might come from nowhere" to tell her what must be done. She expects her dead husband's voice to come over the radio: he is "somewhere speaking unknown words from an invisible broadcasting station." She believes "something outside reality may become real at any minute to give us a new direction."

Meanwhile, the Weed brothers are having a drink together. They share the misery of not being able to answer the question "What can we do?" Mr. Holz says in his "richly guttural tones":

All of us dance on the edge of the abyss, we must ignore death, we must see through it like a cloudy glass, to something else.

Mr. Holz says he wants to be known as a great benefactor: he would give millions for a great cause. Bill Weed asks him: "Would you give a million dollars for abstract beauty?"

It's all around us... such a subtle thing! It's all in the flash of a thought or the drop of a bird's wing. To find the secret of that!

To find that secret Bill would be willing to "reduce beauty to a formula."
Then one might make it the subject of an advertising campaign, that's how they put over religion these days... but a propaganda in favor of abstract perfection!¹⁴)

Mr. Holz is interested in this possibility: “Make it sensational,” and he will write a check. Bill confesses that, to find such a formula, the secret of abstract beauty, he would make a “compact with the Devil.”¹⁵)

Priscilla feels “so worthless” she wishes “she dared to throw (herself) away.” Dr. Weed suggests Priscilla, “delicate... of old stock... with thinner blood,” needs a “radical change of environment.” Priscilla thinks she has found her soul “beating wings” inside her body. Dr. Weed archly says: “That’s not your soul.”

The Reverend Dr. Gulick enters. To this booming-voiced minister of the gospel who shouts the Book of Revelation at his congregation, Dr. Weed says: “I doubt if your old style religion can cope with the vagaries of the modern mind.”¹⁶) Dr. Gulick, spiritual advisor of the suicide Galt, advertises about God in the newspapers, but at the moment he is afraid the newspapers will print the scandalous information that a suicide’s wife is attending a party on the night of the suicide.

The Thick-Necked Man and the Effeminate Man quarrel and fight with “mincing blows.” Nobody pays any attention to them.

¹⁴) In Standards the Cabaret Dancer recommends advertising the plight of the girl of the slums. In Loud Speaker the politican says if you tell a big enough lie and repeat it over and over people will eventually believe it. In Success Story Sol Ginsburg writes a successful advertising formula, not for abstract beauty but for cosmetics goods that he characterizes in the name of one of the goddesses of beauty, Venus.

¹⁵) In Success Story it is metaphorically suggested that advertising man Sol Ginsburg makes a pact with the devil.

¹⁶) In Standards the dramatist strongly criticizes a minister of the old-time religion for doing nothing about the problem of poverty.
Dr. Weed says they behave like children. Dr. Gulick agrees and wonders where it will all end. 17) Dr. Weed says:

People disintegrate under a certain social pressure. That pressure is dangerously common in our period.

Aunt Bertha, speaking with Bill Weed, says she keeps her mind clear by keeping a “good image” in her mind. Bill calls her “hard and cruel” -- he tells her she is dead and does not know it. 18)

As for himself, Bill admits he has “nothing left but the funny idea of an old pure love that still haunts” him. The way out of his emotional impasse is to find a “real pure feeling.” He says: “You can make anything real if you believe it enough.” He asks Priscilla to believe in themselves: “You and I utterly alone together.”

Priscilla calls this ideal “awful.” She says: “You want to destroy everything around us... Leave us standing in a vacuum.” Bill reminds her of the dream they made real when they were young walking in the woods under moonlight, but Priscilla says: We can’t live that over again.” But, under Bill’s certainty that they can, she says: “You’re making me believe what I never believed, making white magic.” 19)

In another part of the roof garden, Mrs. Galt tells Mr. Holz she has been cursed by an evil star. He offers her a sense of

17) In Roger Bloomer Mrs. Bloomer, in Processional Mr. Cohen, in Parlor Magic Mrs. Merton -- all wonder where it (the behavior of their children in changing times) will all end.
18) In Roger Bloomer Roger is pained by seeing the “living dead” in New York. In Parlor Magic Bob Merton says wherever he goes many people are dead and do not know it.
19) In Servant-Master-Lover (1916) Cinders says: “White magic seems to a turned me into something... nigh a peacock...” In Roger Bloomer Roger tries to do “white magic” in his imagination.
direction, and they talk about making love.

Make love [he says] it’s a stupid phrase! You cannot make it, perhaps someday you find a little love...

Mrs. Galt calls him a “regular Oriental.” Mr. Holz says:

I build a house like a railroad station and I call it Nirvana because I would dream to find seven dimensions in it.

Mr. Holz says compared to him Dr. Gulick, who calls himself a man of God yet believes in only three dimensions, is a materialist. Mr. Holz reveals he once owned a little brown bottle which contained the “distilled mystery of the heart of Asia” but he was afraid of it and threw it out a high window. He says: “Maybe the mystery lies now on the sidewalks of New York.” To this, Dr. Gulick sneers: “Eastern magic!”

Similarly, Priscilla begins to disbelieve in Bill Weed’s “white magic.” She says: “I’m just part of an idea, you hardly know I’m here.” Bill talks on -- about “magic forests where true lovers walked in ancient time,” about Launcelot and Guinevere, and about “Iseult with the golden hair.” To no avail. Priscilla will not “make love.” She finds the idea “nauseating.” Bill says: “Love can save us.” (A Dim Echo repeats: “Love can save...”)

Bill kisses Priscilla’s hand. Then he kisses her hands. Passionately. For a moment she is moved. Then “like an excited boy” he clutches her knees, and she says, “Spoiled.” “But that’s love,”


21) In *Roger Bloomer* Roger says that when his father and mother “made” him “Surely there was no hot flesh, no fevered reaching... calmly... calmly... and yet from them... my hot flesh was born!”
Bill says, “bitter...” Bill describes the “fever” in Priscilla: “Love beats in your heart.” He tells her she has the “itch of love.” She says he is making her sick. He retorts she is “hopeless” because she will not let herself go. She scornfully says: “Books... you only say what people have told you...” Nevertheless, Priscilla accompanies Bill, and they climb the steel frame that reaches to an electric sign above the roof. Up so high, Priscilla feels beautiful and free. She begins to dance. Bill tells her she is a “ridiculous sight,” a “pathetic” sight, a girl with “stiff legs.” She cries. Mrs. Galt says Bill “doesn’t love anyone but himself,” but she contributes to Priscilla’s distress by informing her of Mrs. Galt’s affair with Bill.

Bill longs for the

old company of Gods! Jupiter on his mountain, Mithras the Sun-God, the jewelled Astarte, and Isis risen naked from the Nile.

For Bill, the love of Isis and Venus and Astarte\textsuperscript{22}) -- their love was the “perfection of impure desire.”

Dr. Gulick says mythology is “just a lot of fleshly conceits” and calls Bill’s notion of the “perfection of impure desire” absurd. He booms: “God is not mocked!” Bill says Dr. Gulick’s God has nothing to do with the mysteries he is talking about, particularly

\textsuperscript{22}) In Lawson’s short story “The Wrong Cue” (Williams College Monthly, June 1913) actor Jefferson Edwards comes out of a trance when he falls on his knees before a statue of the Virgin Mary. Besides the Virgin Mary and other Christian saints, the various goddesses mentioned here by Bill Weed are among the mythical beauties upon whose stories Lawson drew for his symbolic characters, Louise in Roger Bloomer and Alise in The International. Alise is a “slim dark girl” who “might be eighteen or twenty-six...” each of whose hands “has the mark of a wound on it” and who, born at the crossing of two rivers, calls Italy her home.
the “mystery above us or in us directing our feeble wills.” Bill calls this mystery a “power” to which he has called until his will “cracked like a broken violin string.”

At that moment Priscilla walks in and Bill claims he called her back just by thinking about her. Bill tries to describe the “magnetism,” the “power hidden in us.” Mrs. Galt says Bill has the pride of Lucifer. Bill says:

> What if I am the Devil, building upon mystery, because it’s time, the Devil’s time!

Dr. Gulick thinks Bill is “cracked,” but Bill keeps talking about the “dark power” he possesses that enables him by his will to control any of his surrounding listeners. Dr. Weed advises his brother to stay off strong drink and strong emotions, and explains to his guests Bill’s heredity has given him a certain instability.

Dr. Gulick says there is already a moral order in the universe: “No man has enough imagination to create a new one.” Bill says: “I’ll risk that.” Priscilla says: “So will I.” The Catholic nurse, her head spinning from all of this heady talk, says (“in the voice of a machine”) no good comes from thinking; as a good Catholic who goes to confession, she accepts “God’s handiwork.” Aunt Bertha, a good Christian Scientist, says the nurse as a Catholic accepts a lot of improbable stories, the so-called Holy Virgin is a graven image, and “Popery” is superstition. Bill says:

> Go on, argue about your little creeds, because you’re afraid to stand alone.

Dr. Gulick says: “None of you can get along a moment longer without God.” But Bill does not believe in Dr. Gulick’s God right or wrong, and drinks a toast to the “fulfillment of the ego,” to
himself, because he has "exhausted everything else."

Aunt Bertha says: "The confusion is all in your head." She warns Bill "something terrible can happen." Priscilla announces she is "drunk with something" and she to whom the sky gives "falling sickness" fears something terrible is going to happen to them. They might fall into an abyss. Bill says: "Nothing can happen if we dare to love each other." He says: "We are one this minute, by white magic."

Bill. If our naked souls were streaming through the sky, perhaps we'd be happy.
Priscilla. Perhaps God would pity us then.
Bill. This is Babylon the Great... Broadway and Wall Street, and there to the East the naked sun will soon rise... but look about while the mystery of night still holds us, for it is a dark choice...

The stage darkens.

At the first streak of dawn (Bill says: "Maybe the new red Gods will come marching out of the East"), Priscilla is walking, up high, on a trestle of the steel frame, as if she were "suspended in the void." The great electric sign flashes. Its light blindingly floods the whole auditorium: GOD IS NOT MOocked. The sudden brilliance of this blinding light startles Priscilla. She falls back. She seizes some electric wires to break her fall. The wires crackle, and she receives a voltage causing her to fall with a piercing scream into the abyss\(^23\). The second act of Nirvana ends as

\(^{23}\) Burns Mantle (ibid.) says that Priscilla attempts to commit suicide. J. Brooks Atkinson (New York Times, March 4, 1926 p. 19) says that "an unsophisticated young lady jumps from a roof during a drunken danse macabre."
a bare flicker of light seems to search and find hesitantly
the shapeless form of a girl lying on the floor of the stage,
just a small heap of clothing.

* * *

The action of the third act of *Nirvana* takes place in Dr. Weed’s surgery: “a blinding light, stark white, falls center on operating table,” on which Priscilla lies limp under white sheets, her long gold hair falling back from the end of the table. “The rest of the room is shadowy and unreal.” A “staccato medical pantomime” takes place as Dr. Weed and his nurse work in “formal brisk gestures.”

Bill Weed apologizes. If he had been sober, he would not have permitted Priscilla to climb so high. Dr. Weed thinks it will be a miracle if Priscilla recovers from her spinal injury. Priscilla is unconscious, but the Catholic nurse says she accepts Priscilla’s suffering: “If God makes them suffer, I accept.” Dr. Gulick says suffering is “part of our deepest experience, a symbol of Christ’s passion.” Bill blames Dr. Gulick’s God for taking from him the one person he loves. Dr. Gulick says: “Blessed are the pure in heart.” He agrees with Bill that they are “nowhere, in a void” and God or no God they are “supremely ridiculous.” Bill listens to what he calls “static” and “lost bits of laughter riding round like thin whispers.”

Then Bill says: “I thought I could create by my own will in spite of God. I’m an artist.” Dr. Gulick says “God has no use for artists” and gets Bill to pray to this non-aesthetic God: “Believe and you will be free.” Bill gets on his knees: “I think I am praying,” he says, “I think I am no longer afraid.”

At this moment of prayer, “Priscilla gives a long piercing laugh
from the depths of her unconscious." Under a violet light, she struggles as if trying to get up. Then she speaks "in raucous bleating voice of consumptive girl of the streets":

Take me then, what do I care for pretty words when I'm hot and cold with wanting hands all over me. What do I care if I got that little itch in my stomach sweating for an answer. Take me, take me. ...A girl knows what she wants lying in bed at night sweating for arms around her. Arms of Jesus Christ maybe...

Bill Weed now worries about Priscilla and her "dual personality" and about himself:

I always try to reach completeness, always something grotesque breaks the pattern, cuts the web of my purest thought — but now it's different... for it's true that a voice spoke in me then, which I can still hear... oh, not words... even the thought of God is a secret which cannot be spoken, but I accept...

Dr. Gulick now questions whether Bill’s conversion is genuine:

You talk as if it were easy, that is, I mean God, as if one could just make up one’s mind to accept: I tell you no torture can compare with the torture of the religious life.

The stage directions say:

The dim room with its long shadows seems to take on the aspect of a medieval church in which the two men talk in awed voices as if their words were drawn from some deep interior source.

Bill says he can bring the past and the future into a single moment. Dr. Gulick says:

By a lapse of time we stand together... before the very cross where He hangs, accepting the sin of the world...
Christ... the ultimate truth, a symbol hung in the abyss...

Whosever voice he heard, whatever secret he has accepted, Bill Weed does not accept Christ in the simple way Gulick does. Bill asks: "Isn’t He dead yet? For two thousand years he’s waited, isn’t it enough?"

Gulick. You dare to laugh and be proud, even before Him?
Bill. He hangs on the cross, but the sin of the world is too much for Him. He’s too little and human to bear it.24)

Gulick. All right then, if the whole brotherhood of us would love Him, make an end of war, stand together in peace...

"...eventually," Dr. Gulick says, "we shall realize a Christian brotherhood."25) Bill is not satisfied with old eventualities, however. He wants "something new." He says: "I want the living Christ and more, I want to go out into space and understand." Dr. Gulick impatiently walks out. Alone, Bill reveals in a soliloquy that he is not as proud toward Christ as Dr. Gulick thinks he is, at least not proud in the way Dr. Gulick means. Bill says:

To the laughing and unrelenting Jesus, I want your pain, feel those nails in my hands, vinegar in my side... Your secret, proud Master, Your secret?

There is "A crash of broken chords in the air." Bill, in "voice of hurt child," says: "Oh, Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, What is truth?"


25) In Parlor Magic Martha Merton makes a closing speech strikingly similar to Dr. Gulick's.
When the nurse enters, Bill reverts to glibness and says he has had an "amusing" vision which he "must figure out sometime." The nurse reports that Priscilla has been speaking as if she were being crucified with red-hot nails. Bill says his mind is close to Priscilla's mind and suggests "God's help" will now make Priscilla well.

Bill informs Dr. Weed that the "fumes of a mystic presence were heavy in this room" and says he has received a call to believe in a new religion beyond Christianity. There must be new legends, new mysteries—- one must find an absolute. Dr. Weed says to his novelist brother:

> I've watched you with some amusement, in a succession of poses, love affairs, egotism, nonsense... Now I see you naked before a mystery—- Hell, what a sight!

Fortunately for Bill who wants to go out into space to understand, Mr. Holz announces the first "practical" rocket is ready for launching: "It will revolutionize thought." Dr. Weed says: "Bunk!" Then he immediately muses: "For a few minutes to know so much, to know more than Einstein... to open man's war on space."

Mr. Holz asks Dr. Weed to be the first man in space, but Dr. Weed refuses. His brother Bill Weed, a "modern author turning to religion," decides to be the first man in space. Mrs. Galt harangues him:

> What are you going to do...? Nothing? Or crucify yourself? Go on... hang from a cross ten times higher than the Woolworth Building, up where the stars sing in rag-time—- make a poem of the poet's crucifixion... but I carry inside me the poet's child!

Mr. Holz ignores this outburst. He says:

> A man goes to explore space, tremendous publicity, for the ceremonies we have an Irish Cardinal, a free-thinking Rabbi.
He invites Dr. Gulick to officiate at the ceremonies. For Dr. Gulick it is no easy matter to accept this invitation. It is a question of moral conduct. He "really" does not know what to do. "I try," he says, "to make my religion a practical service, in a business sense. Sincere..."

Bill Weed sees everyone "like people under a weight, struggling with forces, dying for lack of a simple belief." Bill says only the Catholic nurse is representative of a real faith, a legend which is bread and wine to your spirit... That's what we want, but a new legend, for there is change: the new red Gods walk across the land with feet of steel, their names are electricity and ether and the radio God speaking from his iron horn! But that's just a hint of a secret beyond them, a greater God...

Bill again speaks of magnetism. He wants to "raise a new symbol higher than the Cross." He wants to "raise a high altar where the spark of power lies in perpetual vibration."

Bill's excitement stirs his brother Dr. Weed to imagine an "amusing hypothesis":

A magnetic synthetic Virgin, made by chemical analysis, designed by abstract mathematics: when finished she would be blonde like a movie queen, triumphant over every scandal, ride a snow-white aeroplane across a red sky, crowned with stars, to visit the planet Mars every Saturday night.

Mrs. Galt, her conscience perhaps excited by these hypotheses, calls the police. Although she did not murder her husband, she now takes the "entire responsibility" for his death, saying: "I prefer a definite guilt to a vague fear."

Now Priscilla suddenly "rises, slides to her feet, takes a step, stands wavering, sings in a quavering inspired voice":

If there's anybody here like weeping Mary, Call upon your Jesus and he'll draw nigh... Glory... Glory...

Priscilla says electricity has flamed in her path: "I'm cured now, I know it." She tries to dance with "pathetic difficulty, raising urgent fluttering hands." Bill Weed, pleased, says: "We can make the universe stop for an instant." He says his mind and Priscilla's mind will never be separated.

Mr. Holz sees at once how the world can use Priscilla. When Bill goes into space, Priscilla will remain in a trance to get messages from /him/ by hypnotic suggestions, she will write messages for the world to read, written... with a pronounced literary flavor...

Bill and Mr. Holz sign a contract for the rocket trip. Bill defines "God" as a steel rail with a white light on it, slightly curved through infinity. I can see it, my forehead against the steel, whirring along.

In the midst of this, Mr. Holz does not forget business and makes Bill sign a quit-claim freeing Mr. Holz from liability for damages.

*Nirvana* ends with the crack-up of the Catholic nurse, who feels herself

Falling from star to star... like Lucifer, son of the morning... unless you hit something, you fall forever... and forever...\(^{26}\)

\(^{26}\) John Anderson reports (*New York Evening Post*, March 4, 1926, p. 6) that the last line of the play is "She [Priscilla] has been dead for more than an hour." This indicates that the author's manuscript upon which the above summary is based was altered in the performance.
The publication of a detailed summary of John Howard Lawson's unpublished play *Nirvana* makes it possible for historians of American drama to:

1. Relate *Nirvana* to Lawson's other plays of the 1920's and 1930's. In numerous footnotes herein there are indicated many points of possible comparison between *Nirvana* and others of Lawson's dramatic works.

2. Relate *Nirvana* to other dramas by other American playwrights of the period, e.g., Eugene O'Neill's *Dynamo* (1929). Barrett H. Clark and others see in *Dynamo* parallels to Kaiser's *Gas*. O'Neill said the "origin" of *Dynamo* was in his observation of a dynamo generating electricity. O'Neill saw *Nirvana* in performance and discussed it with Lawson in March 1926. O'Neill described *Dynamo* as a play "that will dig at the roots of the sickness of today...":

--- the death of an old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with.

This description might easily be taken as an abstract summary of *Nirvana*. *Dynamo* itself has similarities to *Nirvana* in details:

a) O'Neill's description of the Reverend Hutchins Light might be applied to the Reverend Dr. Gulick;

His voice is the bullying one of a sermonizer who is the victim of an inner uncertainty that compensates itself by being boominly over-assertive

27) And perhaps to dramas of later periods, e.g., Arthur Miller's *After the Fall* (1964).


b) O'Neill's engineer Ramsey Fife, an "atheistic bigot," has affinities with physiologist Dr. Alonzo Weed;

c) When Reuben Light takes Ada Fife onto the roof of the dynamo room where she is frightened of falling and where he is electrocuted in a "flash of bluish light" there is a suggestion of the catastrophe of Priscilla Emerson's electrocution and fall;

d) Fife says that the arch-enemy of Reverend Light's God is "Lucifer, the God of Electricity."

More important than these details is Reuben Light's conception of the dynamo as the "Great Mother of Eternal Life, Electricity"\(^{30}\):

She wants us to realize the secret dwells in her! She wants some one man to love her purely and when she finds him worthy she will love him and give him the secret of truth and he will become the new savior who will bring happiness and peace to men!

O'Neill's conception of electricity in *Dynamo* is directly related to Lawson's similar conception in *Nirvana*.\(^{31}\)

3. Relate *Nirvana* to the writings of other members of the so-called "lost generation" whom Alfred Kazin in *On Native Grounds* has called "specialists in anguish."

4. Relate *Nirvana* to the American cultural life of its time as

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an expression of an energetic but desperate yearning for personal and social integration shared not only by intellectuals but also by millions of other people in that hectic postwar period.

5. Relate _Nirvana_ to the so-called "theater of the absurd" of which it might be considered the first American example. John Russell Taylor says in _The Penguin Dictionary of Theatre_ (1966) that the central theme of the theater of the absurd is: Awareness of humanity's plight as purposeless in an existence out of harmony with its surroundings produces a state of metaphysical anguish. This is the central theme of _Nirvana_. One point, however: in _Nirvana_ Bill Weed's own "metaphysical anguish" is tied to a search for personal purposefulness: Bill's on-the-face-of-it absurd rocket flight into space is in part symbolic of his developing theosophical consciousness, the "movement of consciousness upon a higher space," although an untheosophical audience might not recognize it as such.

6. Relate the language of _Nirvana_, a kind of American baroque, to the language of Lawson's _Success Story_ (1932), to the language of Clifford Odets' _Awake and Sing!_ (1935), and to the language of such novels as Nathaniel West's _Miss Lonelyhearts_ and others whose

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32) See P. D. Ouspensky, _op. cit._, p. 4. Lawson's "Foreword" to _Nirvana_ says: "A deep conviction has led to making the religious impulse the crucial turning point of the theme. But the theoretical exposition of this matter would fill a volume." One wishes that Lawson had filled only one page of theoretical exposition of the theme of _Nirvana_. As is well-known, Lawson himself later rejected _Nirvana_ as "swamped in mysticism." See John Howard Lawson. _Theory and Technique of Playwriting_. New York: Hill and Wang, 1960. (Third Edition) In his "Introduction" (vii–xxxii) Lawson also rejects the theater of the absurd as escapist and defeatist drama.

33) In a letter to me (January 25, 1963) Clifford Odets writes: "[Lawson] had influence on me as a writer -- I saw from his _Success Story_, in which I understudied the leading part, that common speech could make a flexible, poetic dialogue."
linguistic style mixes formal and colloquial English, blends the sardonic and ironic modes, combines comedy and pathos with crucial intensity. *Nirvana* perhaps initiates in American literature a style of language that reaches its apotheosis in Saul Bellow's novel *Hum­boldt's Gift*, whose protagonist Charles Citrine has many of the same theosophical concerns of *Nirvana*'s Bill Weed.