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JOHN HOWARD LAWSON'S *SOULS* (1915)

Le Roy Robinson

Most historians of 20th century American drama discuss John Howard Lawson's experimental dramas of the 1920s and/or his social protest dramas of the 1930s, but there is hardly any discussion of Lawson's work before his first Broadway production, *Roger Bloomer*, in 1923. ¹⁾

The present article describes for the first time an early, copyrighted (May 21, 1915), unpublished and unproduced play, *Souls*, which Lawson began under the title *Atmosphere* in 1914. This description provides historians of American drama with an example of Lawson's early writing which has both biographical and historical interest. ²⁾

In "A Calendar of Commitment," his unfinished and as yet unpublished autobiography, begun when he was about 70 years old, John Howard Lawson does not even mention *Atmosphere*, begun when he was about 20, and he refers only briefly to its successor, *Souls*, copyrighted before he was 21: "I made an outline for *Souls: A Psychic Fantasy*, in which all the action took place in the minds of the characters. My notes dealt with 'major and minor emotions' and the 'nature of the subconscious'." ³⁾

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- 1) Adequate descriptions of earlier plays by John Howard Lawson were not available until recently. For descriptions of *Servant-Master-Lover* and *Standards*, both produced in 1916 but never published, see my "John Howard Lawson: The Early Years II" (*Keiei to keizai*, December 1977). For a description of *The Spice of Life*, written in 1916 under the title *The Butterfly Lady*, copyrighted 1919 and sold to Famous Players-Lasky (later Paramount Pictures Corporation) but never produced or published, see my "John Howard Lawson's Unpublished *The Spice of Life*" (*Keiei to keizai*, July 1979).
 - 2) This description is based on a xerox copy of the Library of Congress 69-page typed manuscript of *Souls*.
 - 3) The Library of Congress manuscript's title page does not have the subtitle, "A Psychic Fantasy," but this subtitle does appear in the copious notes (1914, 1915, 1916, 1917) for several possible versions of *Souls* which have been made available to me on microfilm by Dr. Kenneth W. Duckett, Curator of Special Collections, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

Mary Kirkpatrick, then Lawson's agent, read the outline for *Souls*, dissuaded him from continuing his theatrical experimentation, and persuaded him to write commercial plays instead. 4)

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The action of *Souls* takes place in the library of a mansion on Madison Avenue in New York City, "obviously the dwelling of a man of taste and wealth." 5)

The predominant note in the furniture... is red, but the decoration is so rich and bizarre as to give an effect of variety. 6) ...furniture of carved mahogany... a handsome writing desk with a yellow shaded lamp, not lighted... a table with an electric lamp with an embroidered red shade, also unlighted... Windows with leaded panes of light-yellow glass extend back into an alcove, at the rear of which is an archway heavily curtained with crimson drapery... a door... heavy folding doors, in front of which are drawn red curtains... The tops of bookcases are covered with ornaments and knick-knacks... some handsome oil paintings. The time is just about sunset. 7) The only light in the room is that of the late afternoon sun shining through the yellow glass, the yellow brightness giving the room a "strange, unnatural effect."

Gordon Milborn is sitting at his desk. He is leaning forward in intense interest. Milborn is a little under middle-age. Affable, benignant, pleasant. Manner rather nervous. Face, handsome but not particularly strong. Hair, dark and just a little grey in

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- 4) In "A Calendar of Commitment" John Howard Lawson says that Mary Kirkpatrick's insistence that he learn Broadway techniques and meet Broadway commercial requirements seemed sensible to him at the time, and he always remained grateful to her for what she taught him, "although it led /him/ to bleak despair."
 - 5) There are similar libraries of "taste and wealth" in *Standards* and *Gentlewoman* (1934).
 - 6) In *Servant-Master-Lover* the abducted Cinders wakes up in a library-like bedroom whose decor gives an effect of the bizarre and grotesque.
 - 7) A synopsis on the title page specifies the time as 8:15 P. M. *Standards* also begins at sunset. In *Roger Bloomer* Louise Chamberlain once waves goodbye to Roger as the red sun sun sets. In *Nirvana* poet Bill Weed reminds Priscilla Emerson that when he had left home she kissed him goodbye in the middle of a red sunset.

spots. Milborn has the general posture and bearing of one of the idle rich. He is more or less an aesthete.

Robert Howells stands looking down at Milborn searchingly. Howells, an older man, tall, striking in appearance, is keen, incisive, definite in manner and speech. Eyes, quiet and searching. He talks slowly, his voice possessing a sort of hypnotic power. Howells is a doctor and psychologist.⁸⁾ The conversation between Milborn and Howells provides the latter the opportunity to describe his ideas about psychology:

...simply the study of character. The science of men's souls... Most people judge life by externals... I judge by the truths of the spirit. Souls. The inner life of feeling and emotion that goes on deep down in the heart of man, beneath the fooleries and shams and fakes of outer existence... Personality is much deeper. A man's words are deceptions, lies, trivialities. A man's words may be honey when there is murder in his soul... We all live double lives... The body lives in houses and rooms, but the soul lives in a dwelling of its own creation, an atmosphere that it weaves around itself... A *soul house*. Your spiritual atmosphere is the most important thing in the world to you. More important than the air in your lungs or the blood in your veins—the House of your living soul... Most men are afraid to look into their own souls, because there are damnable things in most men's souls. ⁹⁾

Milborn, who considers Howells a “damned peculiar” man with a peculiar point of view, likes peculiar people and guesses he's a little peculiar himself. Howells refutes this: “You're rich and idle—that's about all.” Milborn concurs: “Rich and idle with a taste for

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- 8) It is possible Lawson took the name Howells from that of William D an Howells, whose only novel about abnormal psychology, *The Shadow of a Dream* (1890), he might have read.
- 9) *Souls* is one of the earliest experiments in 20th century American drama with psychological themes. Lawson's notes for various versions of *Souls* refer to Freud and Jung and other now lesser known psychologists and to O. Henry and Arthur B. Reeves, both of whom introduced ideas similar to those of Howells into their popular fictions. (I have abbreviated Howells' speech, as I have abbreviated numerous speeches throughout.)

books and pictures and expensive ornaments—and a distaste for human society.”

Milborn is not interested in human souls, either, he says, but he listens when Howells describes his soul to him in a low hypnotic voice:

Outwardly you are a man of leisure and taste. A respectable cynic. Your outward self deceives most people, but it doesn't deceive me... there's something different in your soul. Hidden, Hellish things... You only realize them dimly and subconsciously. You deceive yourself with trivialities and shams. You judge people by the warts on their noses instead of by the thoughts in their hearts.

Milborn contradicts Howells:

“I don't judge people at all. I'm simply not interested in them. Most people bore me. Human society bores me.” Milborn says he has a profound respect for human nature: most people are thoroughly good. He is not a cynic. He is simply lonely. He seldom sees other than three people: Howells, whom he has known for a long time; poet Roland Rod, in whom he is interested; and his secretary Mary Morse, of whom he is fond.

Howells imagines Mary has a beautiful soul. Milborn doesn't know anything about Mary's soul, but she has a beautiful face, and she's clever. Milborn says:

“It's a strange thing, isn't it? Mary and my mother and I living together in this big old house. If she were only my private secretary, it would be different—but she is a great deal more than that. We have become good friends in the five months since she's been my secretary—such good friends that—well, it seems a little peculiar, doesn't it?” It was originally Milborn's mother's idea that Mary should live in their huose, “but now that mother's confined to her room, an absolute invalid, well, it means that Mary and I are practically alone—and people talk about it.” (Howells notes that people *always* talk about everything.)¹⁰

10) John Howard Lawson's mother died as an absolute invalid (she had breast cancer). In “A Calendar of Commitment” Lawson mentions that because of the family's lack of social roots he and his sister Adelaide, five years older than he, were thrown together for mutual support, which apparently made their father uneasy.

Milborn informs Howells that he and Mary are going to be married. Howells, not surprised, halfheartedly wishes Milborn happiness. This half-heartedness discomforts Milborn. Howells asserts that he makes Milborn uncomfortable by looking into his soul: "... truth is always peculiar—if you and I were to talk to the living God we'd say he had a peculiar point of view."¹¹⁾ Howells adds: "I think straight instead of thinking crooked—and I'm never afraid to say what I think."¹²⁾

Milborn wants Howells to say what he thinks about the impending marriage. At first Howells is non-committal: "It depends on what there is in your souls." Then Howells points out Milborn at 38 is 16 years older than Mary. And Milborn has known Mary for only a short time.

"Love isn't measured by years," Milborn says.¹³⁾ He and Mary have been thrown together very much: "It's given us a chance to know one another's moods, morning, noon, and night." He is very fond of Mary. His big, lone house has been his temple of loneliness: "Mary's companionship means something to me." (Howells: "Companionship is very different from love.") Milborn says there's no reason why he shouldn't make Mary happy. He has wealth. He is a quiet sort of man. He's fond of her. He is (he admits) a little quick-tempered and—"Infernally jealous. If I should see Mary kissing another man, I'd probably kill him." Mary has been rather lonely too—lonely and poor; he, Milborn, is lonely and rich. "I haven't anything to do with all my money. I haven't got the health to put it in drinking champagne—and I haven't got the temperament to put it in kissing chorus girls."¹⁴⁾ Milborn rejects as foolish Howells' suggestion he is using Mary as a way of

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- 11) In his poem "Invictus" (*Williams Literary Monthly*, February 1912) Lawson writes: "Even before the living God, my soul shall stand alone." In *The International* (1928) the Living God appears as the Dalai Lama of Tibet.
- 12) In *Servant-Master-Lover* the Master points out: "I say what I mean."
- 13) In *Atmosphere*, the first draft of *Souls*, this line is spoken by Mary Morse.
- 14) The subject of Milborn's health is dropped at this point. In *The Spice of Life* similarly rich and idle but younger Gaston Brown is interested in drinking champagne and kissing chorus girls.

putting in time, and he ignores Howells' suggestion that Mary is fond of the poet Roland Rood. "Roland falls in love with every woman he meets." ¹⁵⁾ (Howells says that's because Roland is [a poet.] If this is characteristic of Roland's temperament, it amuses Milborn and, he says, it probably amuses Mary too: "But they have nothing in common." Mary has common sense, intellectual power, brains. Roland is a poet, young, poor, enthusiastic, wild-eyed, a damned fool with a taste for literature, odd, love-sick, light-headed, careless.

Howells thinks Milborn misjudges Roland: "He may be a great poet someday..." Milborn says: "Perhaps. Great fools often become great poets." In fact, Milborn is interested in Roland's poetry: "He can't get a market for his work. He's discouraged and very poor. So I'm helping him. I like to be able to assist people in that way."¹⁶⁾

Milborn returns the conversation to his impending marriage: "Mary and I are going to be married very soon and very quietly." No fuss or ceremony. He will try to keep it out of the newspapers. Only the necessary witnesses. But the wedding will be a church wedding: "Mary is very religious. She insists on having a minister—Episcopal."¹⁷⁾

Howells, invited to be best man, suddenly asks: "How long is it since you were divorced?" Milborn, who cannot understand Howells' hostility toward his impending marriage, becomes very angry: "My first marriage ceased to exist two years ago. It has passed out of my life and it's got to pass out of your conversation."

15) In *Nirvana* (1926) this is said of poet Bill Weed by his brother Dr. Alonzo Weed, a physician studying the human nervous system.

16) In this philanthropy, Milborn is somewhat like Mr. Holz in *Nirvana*. (The book Milborn will finance is described as a "thin volume with board covers—about twenty poems.")

17) As a young pupil at the Halsted School, Yonkers, New York, in the early 1900s, John Howard Lawson was under the care of Principal Mary Sicard Jenkins, an Episcopalian; when Lawson was about 12 years old in 1906, Mary Sicard Jenkins chaperoned him and his sister Adelaide on their first trip to Europe.

Howells now openly declares his opposition. He points an accusing finger at Milborn, who sits cowering before him, his hands clutching his desk weakly. The marriage is wrong, it's damnable. In Mary's soul there is nothing but hate. Milborn, too, is deluding himself. He does not love Mary, he is a damnable cynic, he is a brute. Howells "probed /Milborn's/ soul as a surgeon probes the flesh"—and he has seen the truth.

Milborn mumbles: "What you say is insane." Then he regains self-control and speaks solemnly: "... if anything has happened between Mary and myself it's our own business. It had best be kept secret—utterly secret." He swears he loves Mary: "It was a passion that came upon me like fire—on both of us. We did wrong—both of us—but it's all right now. We are making it all right."

Howells says: "You swear it with your lips, but do you whisper it in your soul?" ¹⁸⁾ Howells predicts this marriage will end like Milborn's first one, in Hell: "You married your first wife with nothing but hatred in your heart and afterwards you crushed her and wounded her." Milborn excitedly says: "That's a lie. Edith ran away". ¹⁹⁾ Howells answers: "Yes, she ran away, because you were killing her with brutal gentlemanliness, because you hated her." She ran away with a scoundrel, not because she loved him, but because she hated Milborn. "And do you know what happened? The man died, and she's selling her body on the streets rather than beg a penny from you because she knows you hate her." ²⁰⁾

Howells continues his indictment of Milborn's "dirtiness of soul":

"The law-courts lied and the newspapers lied and your friends lied—but I'm not lying, I'm telling you the truth that stings the soul... Outwardly you are benevolent, cultured, artistic, wise—but... in your soul there's tyranny and hate and damnation... When you married Edith you thought that marriage was a botanical process—a way of turning wild oats into Easter lilies. And now you marry Mary because you've wronged her and because you're afraid. And you

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- 18) In the notes for one version of *Souls* Milborn's runaway wife asks Milborn this question about *his* earlier declaration of love for her.
 19) In notes for various versions of *Souls* Milborn's wife is named either Magdalen or Magdalene.
 20) It is not clear how Howells knows all this.

think in your lying way that you'll be happy because she's soft and comfortable and warm—and soon you'll hate her."

The sun has just about set and the stage has become quite dark. Milborn, who has stood very still as if petrified, gives way to anger and with a fierce exclamation makes a movement as if to strike Howells.

The library is suddenly illuminated by the lighting of the red lamp. Mary Morse looks at the two men unflinchingly. She wears a plain evening dress of white, without ornament. Mary is pretty in a girlish sort of way but her face is not without strength. She is of medium height and build. Her manner is timid, but her voice is calm and low and sweet. "I think," she says to Howells, "that if you have any insults to offer me, you can say them to my face now."

At this, Roland Rood enters. A young man, slim, with clothes beginning to become ragged. A poet's eager eyes, and a tendency to exuberance in expression and manner.³¹⁾ Roland wants Milborn to look over the proofsheets of a book of his poems. Roland notes ruefully that the publisher refuses to print one poem called "The Goddess of Passionate Nights" because he considers the poem's reference to breasts and thighs immoral. (Milborn cynically comments people like any books that talk about breasts and thighs.) Roland says he tries to tell the truth in his poetry. (Howells says if Roland told the truth he'd be stoned instead of ignored.)

Milborn, intensely nervous, leaves. Howells informs Mary and Roland he'd said some unpleasant things to Milborn. Mary goes out to speak with Milborn, to comfort him.

Roland says he's worried about Mary; he hopes she's not in any trouble. Howells suggests she is, but he's not at liberty to talk about it. Roland would like to help Mary, but she doesn't take him seriously. She thinks he's a dilettante, light-headed, good

21) Roland Rood (like the poet Roland Ross in *Atmosphere*) is apparently the prototype for poet Roger Bloomer in *Roger Bloomer*, as well as for poet Bill Weed in *Nirvana*.

for nothing. (Howells laughs: "Nobody takes a poet seriously." Roland: Not a *poor* poet.") Roland thinks people regard him as an oddity, but he vows: "Someday I'll show them that they're wrong."

Howells and Roland discuss a play the poet has been thinking about writing—a soul play:

"It's something new, different, thrilling," Roland says. A play of soul lives. A play in which the action takes place in the souls of the characters, a play in which the actors are souls. Howells: "Naked souls revealed in the blinding light of truth—real and without sham." Roland: "Such a play would be a revelation. It would shock people. Some people would rather be dead than disturbed." 22)

Howells: That's the only difference between a murderer and an artist. A murderer makes people dead. An artist makes people uncomfortable. Both do valuable work.

Roland: That's a cynical thing to say.

Howells: It's the truth.

Roland: Very few plays tell the truth. Most of them deal with shams and lies.

Howells: ...a soul play would deal with realities. It would judge women by their purity ... and men by their courage...

Roland: ...such a play ... must be visualized...

Roland visualizes the interior of Mary's soul as very white and clean and silent—a snowy sanctuary lit with crimson lamps. Howells says it takes a poet to paint the pictures of the interiors of souls (soul houses, according to Roland), and he outlines Roland's play:

"Each scene would represent a soul—the home of its hope, the dwelling of its despair. Act I—a Temple of Loneliness. Act II—a House of Fear. Act III—a Shrine of Romance." Howells then outlines a simple situation for Roland's play—a situation which would show a man and a woman about to be married, deluding themselves with a pretense of love, but in their souls would be hate and fear...23)

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- 22) In *Standards* the Dramatist makes almost the exact same comment about theatre audiences.
- 23) In *The Spice of Life* there is also a discussion about playwriting which is reflexive on the play in which it exists.

Mary then enters to tell Howells Milborn wants to speak with him. When Mary and Roland are alone, he recites to her (not one of the poems he is proud of, it's simply an impression) a poem called "Summer":

A scented garden—silence—and the croon
 Of bees that chant unending lullabies
 A breath of poppies—Lethe lips and eyes
 Swooning above me—till your fairy grace
 Melts into warmth—your heart beats close to mine
 A moment of the madness of strong wine
 The crimson perfume of a swift embrace
 And then I am alone—amidst the croon ²⁴⁾
 Of bees that chant their endless lullabies.
 Alone with only memory of your face
 Beneath the spangled dimness of the skies
 And flower petal redness of the moon.

Mary says the poem ends a little abruptly. Ronald shrugs: "Those things generally do." Mary likes the poem; it's the way a poem ought to be, short and intense. Ronald says: "Like love—short and intense." Ronald adds Mary doesn't know much about love. Mary calls him a fool for flirting with her. Ronald tries to be flippant: "Whenever I express a sentiment of simple admiration, you misconstrue it as a vulgar attempt to to make love to you." Ronald says the poem he has just read is a vision of Mary. Mary asks him not to spoil their friendship by being foolish. Ronald proclaims: "I love you." He seizes her and kisses her passionately. As Mary dazedly pushes him away, Milborn enters, then Howells.

Milborn has a right to interfere; he has a "claim" on Mary. Milborn wants an explanation of the passionate kiss and turns on Mary with "savage wrath." Mary sinks weepingly into a chair, saying Milborn is unjust to her. Roland fiercely protests Milborn's treatment of Mary—until it becomes clear to him that Milborn and Mary have had sexual relations with each other.

24) This phrase was originally "amidst the roar/Of bees..." (It is possible that the poem was written while Lawson was in college.)

Howells steps among these three and says: "This thing is horrible foolishness." Marriage between Millorn and Mary would be a mockery, a marriage of hate. Howells is "stronger and wiser" than they are (he says), and he insists on telling them the truth of their own souls. He speaks with "great slowness and power, while the three about him are awed into complete stillness". The first act curtain of *Souls* descends.

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As the action of Act II of *Souls* begins, the actors are in exactly the same positions they were in at the end of Act I. Howells makes a speech similar to his last one:

"I'm going to show you the things you don't dare to see in your own souls. I'm sick of /your/ calling fear and lust by the names of friendship and love. (To Milborn) You think you love this woman because you've wronged her. She thinks she loves you because you've wronged her, and she's afraid to think anything else... Now you're going to be married, and, Roland, you're going to lose the woman you love, and you /Milborn/ are going to marry a woman you hate, and you /Mary/ are going to sell yourself to be his slave—and all this in the name of a sickly convention that says it shall be so... (To Roland, and then to the others) And you think you don't love her anymore because she's weak and foolish. But all of you are lying to yourselves because you're afraid of the pain of looking at the truth... Outwardly you are silent. Men and women are like that in moments of great stress—but in your souls there is turmoil, strife... The dwelling of your soul is black / Milborn/ and sombre, a place of selfishness and deceit. And yours /Mary/ white and clean with a shadow of grey. And the house of Roland's soul is a shrine of poetry and crimson romance.

Milborn, becoming restive, says: "This is foolishness." Howells looks deep into Milborn's eyes: "I can see it—the house of your living soul, a place of darkness and gloom and utter loneliness." The scene gradually becomes darker. Howells speaks with great slowness and power: "You're thinking hate... you're remembering all the barren selfishness of your life... selfishness of wealth and idleness... lechery and luxury..."

The lamps on the table and the lights in the alcove have gradually faded until the stage has become absolutely black. Howells' voice sounds mysteriously out of the darkness, as the scene shifts to the First Interlude, the Interior of Gordon Milborn's Soul:

...a dim room in the form of a shallow circle surrounded by a flight of two shallow steps which form a semi-circle and lead up to great black pillars. Between the black pillars, irregular draperies, some white, some black. Between the curtains, glimpses of dim and twisted recesses, here and there the light of a torch. The only light in the main room is a pale sort of blueness which trickles from the roof. 25)

The characters are in the same positions as in the previous scene. Milborn then reveals his soul:

"That's the way it's always been. My life has been a damnable mockery—and the only thing I've learned from it is that men are all fools and women are all devils. You, Mary, you with your innocence—the first time I kissed you, what did you think of? Whether anybody'd seen us. I hardly thought it would end in anything at the time, but life has a way of moving very fast. I don't know what your motives really were; perhaps you wanted money; perhaps you were simply afraid of me. I suspect everyone's motives. I suspected yours."

Mary, who told Milborn she loved him, now wants to know why he told her he loved her.

"What else could I say? / Milborn asks / That's the only reason a man ever says he loves a woman, because there's nothing else to say. And when a woman says she loves a man it's either because she knows he's her slave." or because she knows he's her master." 26)

Milborn says he dislikes Mary because she makes a pretense of sweetness and innocence. "Women are trained to it by their mothers."

- 25) On July 6, 1906, when he was not quite 12 years old, Lawson visited the Royal Palace, Charlottenburgh, Germany, to see Frederick III's mausoleum. In his (unpublished) journal of "Places Visited in the Summer of 1906 While Traveling in Europe" the young Lawson wrote: "It is a very weird place because a blue light comes through the window."
- 26) This theme is suggested in *Servant-Master-Lover* and in *Success Story* (1932).

When Mary says she hasn't had a mother since she was three, Milborn says pretense comes naturally to women. "The sweetest and most innocent women I've ever known have been harlots"—and perhaps that is what Mary is.²⁷⁾

"I can't understand you, Mary. You haven't acted the way women generally do in cases like this. You've acted so quiet and dignified. But I distrust you. I'm not even sure that you haven't made a fool out of me. You may have known a lot of men—too intimately."

Milburn pauses moodily, then goes on: "Nothing makes much difference to me anymore.²⁸⁾ I've become accustomed to doing the easiest thing. That's one reason I'm marrying you. If I didn't, you might start trouble. By marrying you I'm saved all risk of trouble—and it will be easy to throw you off afterward."

Milborn then talks about his conscience: "Love is the outward pretense I use but here in my soul I know love is a laughable lie. I know I don't love you and it's not only to avoid trouble I'm marrying you. There's another reason—a deeper reason—a sentimental reason. It's the memory of something my conscious self has forgotten, but here in my soul it still rankles."

In the summer of his 17th year Milborn found out what a foolish thing love is from a farmer's daughter. They were walking in the fields one summer evening.²⁹⁾ And the thing happened. He never saw her again. She was only sixteen—and she had a child.³⁰⁾ She wrote him damnably pitiful letters, but he never paid any attention. Then she and the child died. He never cared much, but—

"... Mary, I'm going to marry you, because that thing has bothered me. I'm not the sort of man that hunts women like game. I've only purposely hurt women four or five times. I'm not a scoundrel. I'm simply a selfish man with lots of time and not a thing to do. A good many /women/ have come my way. It's generally been their own fault—and that was the first time. The thing has preyed on me. I haven't thought of it consciously, but it's buried here in my soul."

27) Lawson deals with the virgin harlot theme in *Roger Bloomer, Processional* (1925) and *The International* (1928).

28) In *Atmosphere* both Mary and Milborn's wife Magdalen say the same thing.

29) Milborn identifies the place as Meriden, Connecticut.

30) Lawson deals with the theme of the unmarried mother in *Standards, Roger Bloomer, Processional* and *Parlor Magic* (1963).

Milborn with a bitter laugh repeats that's why he's marrying Mary: "For you—but it won't hurt me—and my conscience will be satisfied." Roland calls Milborn a "damnable cur."

Milborn, who would thrash Roland if he said that to his conscious self, is in his soul rather pleased to be called a damnable cur. He wishes he were thoroughly bad, then he might be happy. The curse of his life lies in that he's neither good nor bad, he's simply selfish and weak. Milborn makes a gesture of disgust and says: "I've never hated anybody anymore than I ever loved anybody. I'm simply half-and-half."

As for his relation with Mary: "It was natural enough. When I want a thing, I generally take it, if I can get it. I wanted Mary, I could get her, it was easy enough. We were practically alone here. She loved me, or she pretended she did. She appealed to me in a sensual way; that is the only way that counts between a man and a woman." Milborn doesn't understand Mary, but he has grown to dislike her. "It was the same with my first wife. I liked her. I soon found that she disliked me. I encouraged it, slowly, subtly, unconsciously. I didn't mistreat her. I'm not the sort of man that mistreats women except once in a while when I want to frighten them. I didn't hate her, but I encouraged her dislike. She made me uncomfortable. She was too cold and handsome. She didn't know how to be kissed."

Milborn will marry Mary because it is the "easiest thing" to do. Besides, if he didn't, she'd go away. He doesn't want her to go away yet; he's not tired of her yet. She has a good figure. She's pleasant to kiss.

Milborn admits he doesn't have deep thoughts. He's a trivial man. His outward self makes a pretense of wisdom and art and taste, but those things don't help to fill the emptiness of his soul. Milborn thinks he should be pitied. He admits he wasn't jealous when he saw Mary and Roland kissing, but it hurt his pride. That's why his outward self made a pretense of being angry. In his soul he hoped Roland would take Mary off his hands...it would be a comfortable way.

The three men now discuss Mary's soul, but before Mary reveals her soul, Milborn concludes baring his.:

At least Mary is afraid of him, because he possesses her. She's in his power. She's his slave. "I like women to fear me. It gives me a delusion of power. It makes me feel strong." Milborn seizes Mary by the wrist. He bends over her. She cowers before him. She tries to free herself. He forces an embrace upon her.

As Howells says, "Her lips kiss you, but there is fear and disgust in her soul," Mary breaks away and gives a single piercing scream. There is sudden darkness. The scene shifts to the Second Interlude, the Interior of Mary Morse's Soul, a place of "grey fear and cloudy uncertainty":

Grey walls without decoration of any kind slope from both sides of the stage toward the center, where they meet, forming a wide gate with iron bars wrought in a peculiar, complicated design. Through the bars glimpses of a dim landscape—hills of strange shape and uncertain outline; above them the yellowness of a sallow sky. In the center of the stage a single marble bench. The place is lighted by a few lamps hanging from the ceiling by chains. In the lamps burn reddish flames.

All the characters stand in exactly the same positions as at the end of the previous interlude. Howells repeats his idea about the fear in Mary's soul. And Mary reveals the truth in her soul:

"... my soul lives in a house of fear... always been that way... afraid of things in my soul... my father used to get drunk and beat me... ever since then I've had a prejudice against drunken people..."³¹⁾ Mary's outward self pretended to be in love with Milborn: "I was afraid of him... because he was clever and wise... and he had a sort of sex attraction for me: that's a more powerful thing than some people think. Then he kissed me. I'd been kissed before a few times, but he kissed me differently, violently. It gave me a thrill. The thrill was a little bit disgusting. It made me dislike him, but I hadn't ever felt a thrill like that before. Everytime he kissed me I felt afraid in my soul..."

31) In *Nirvana*, *The Pure in Heart* (1934) and *Parlor Magic* (1963) Lawson perhaps expresses a "prejudice" against drunken people, that is, people who cannot control themselves when they are drunk. (Although Lawson hardly ever drank before his stint in the Red Cross Ambulance Service during World War I, he later learned to drink and held his liquor well.)

after he kissed me that first time, I got frightened and foolish. The more frightened I was the more I let him kiss me. It was my own fault, my weakness and fear... And all the time my outer self was pretending it was love, I deceived myself. I was a fool." Mary hardly understands herself, but that's the way it happened. "You see, I'd always been sort of waiting for it." For love. For she is the kind of girl that wants love more than anything else in the world. "My outer self has always been cold and matter-of-fact, prudent. But there's never been any prudence in my soul." As for Milborn, "He was rich and said he cared for me. I saw visions of a happy home—and dresses—and flower-gardens—and all the things that feminine women love. I'm not a suffragette in my soul. Very few women are..." She let herself be carried away. "All my life, my outward self has been practicing self-control. I've earned my living since I was seventeen. I lived on six dollars a week for three years. None of you ever lived on six dollars a week." When Roland says he's lived in a garret on nothing a week for a long time, Mary says that's different: "There's something reckless and exciting about nothing a week. There's something prudent and uncomfortable about six dollars a week."

Anyway, in her soul, Mary has been sick of prudence, sick of self-control, so she let herself be carried away: "There's something exciting about being carried away, even by a man that one fears..." Of course, Mary had a reaction: "Not so much ashamed as just frightened. Shame is an artificial sort of thing, but fear comes from the soul. I've always been frightened...fear is the keynote of my character. I'm a natural coward. And there's something else of which I was afraid—poverty. I've been face to face with poverty ever since I was a little girl. That's the reason I didn't allow myself to love you, Roland. You were very poor. It's a sordid fear, but everybody is a little sordid in the depths of their soul."

As for love, "Love isn't a definite sort of thing. It's just a longing, a sort of fever in the blood—that's the way it's been with me. It was easy enough to make myself believe it was /Milborn/ I loved. He told me he loved me. He kissed me until my lips burnt. You didn't do that, Roland; if you'd taken me in your arms and kissed me, it might have been different. Then my outward self might have known it loved you—but as it was only my soul knew it." Mary wasn't sure Roland cared for her until an hour before, when he told her so. It was different with Milborn:

"He was older and stronger. He kissed me. You never did anything more than look at me, Roland. When you looked at me, my heart beat fast, but I remembered prudence and self-control. When /Milborn/ kissed me, I forgot everything."

Roland makes an accusation: "... you gave yourself to this man because he is rich. You sold yourself for money." Mary says:

"Not consciously... I knew /Milborn/ would marry me. My soul kept thinking of a home—nice things to eat and cushions to lie on and a maid to do my hair. You think these things are trivial but they are very important to a woman. A man's happiness consists in achievement and courage and work, but a woman's whole happiness often consists in nothing more than having a becoming emerald pendant to wear against her throat... that's something I've always wanted more than anything else... I've dreamed of it in my soul... an emerald emerald pendant that would be becoming to my throat..."

Mary sums herself up as a trivial and frightened woman who is in a hopeless situation. She knows in her soul she will be unhappy with Milborn, and her growing dislike for him will grow into hate—unless she jumps off a dock, but that takes more nerve than she has. 32) "I've made my bed. I've got to lie in it. That's what father used to keep saying. ... Father's bed consisted mostly of whiskey bottles and he didn't mind lying in it..."

Mary's dream of love is finished. "Love is a very delicate thing, like a flower, with petals that fall in the wind. I had my chance for love and I didn't take it. That was what I was seeking... all I wanted. I've never had much love. Mother died. Father wasn't the sort of person one loves; he was the sort of person one hates. Father died and I went to work. First in a store... I learned stenography in the evenings... then I got a job typewriting. /Milborn/ offered me twenty-five dollars a week to come here and be his secretary... seemed like millions... so I came."

That was only five months before, and a lot of things have happened in those months. "That's all. That's the story of my life, and all my life I've wanted nothing but love. I've dreamed of it on moonlit nights and summer afternoons. And now it's too late. I'm terribly afraid... afraid of things... like a child in a dark room."

32) Lawson deals with suicide in *The Spice of Life*, *Roger Bloomer*, *Nirvana*, *Success Story*, *Gentlewoman*.

Howells wonders what Mary would do if Roland Rood still loved her. Roland hotly retorts: "Loved her? She's soiled herself, betrayed herself to this beast." How does he know this is the first time? How does he know there haven't been other men? How does he know she's not a common prostitute? Mary weeps. Howells says Roland's lips lie, his mouth speaks disgust, but his soul is whispering forgiveness. Howells' voice fades as the stage suddenly becomes black.

The Third Interlude is the Interior of Roland Rood's Soul:

The scene is dimly lighted. On each side of the stage are hung great folds of filmy draperies, crimson and purple and scarlet. These transparent curtains melt into one another, forming a luminous mist of color surrounding the entire stage in a sort of arch. Towards the back of the stage, between the central opening formed by the archway of colored draperies, there is clearly visible a shining snow-white marble altar. A flight of steps leads up to this shrine, in the center of which burns a single scarlet flame. On each side of the scarlet flame is a jar of incense, the smoke of which curls upward. Behind the altar the filmy curtains melt back into the distance.

The characters are standing in exactly the same positions as at the end of the previous interlude.

Roland tenderly says: "I want you, Mary. It don't make any difference. I want you..." Roland tells Mary he outwardly scorns her, but that's a sham, hypocrisy, for in his soul, he loves her. Love makes weakness strength and foolishness wisdom. Besides, he himself is not so fine and holy: "Don't you suppose that I've ever held a prostitute in my arms and kissed her lips while my soul was shouting lust, lust, lust? You've sinned blindly, but I've sinned knowingly, and often. I'm too much of a hypocrite to admit that to you outwardly, but in my soul I admit it... I've done shameful things—things that blaspheme the name of love. Weak, passionate, sensual... I ought to beg your pardon on my knees..."

Roland says he is not, like Milborn, a cynic: "My sin is... too much enthusiasm, ardor, romance. I'm a poet. When I was a boy, I dreamed romantic things, pirates and heroism and love. My soul worshipped before a shrine of romance. /To Milborn/ love is nothing more than a butterfly emotion,

a whim; it satisfies an instinct. But love for me is poetry. When I was young I had dreams of maidens with long yellow hair leaning out of latticed windows. When I got older I found that the maidens with yellow hair were hard to find... so I went to street girls with rouge on their lips—the tragedy of a romantic temperament is it often leads to soiled things. A thirst for adventure is dangerous... often leads one into Hell..."

Roland tells Mary he never realized he'd ever fall in love with a real flesh-and-blood woman. He thought he was too much of a poet for that. He thought love would always remain a dream for him, so he wasted the pretense of love on naked women with bleached hair. Roland then humbly asks Mary's forgiveness.

Mary forgives him. It's easy for women to forgive, she says, men pretend to forgive, but they never forget: "This memory," Mary says, "would hang over us like a sword on a thread." She's made a mistake, she's broken a law, she's got to pay. Roland refuses to accept helplessness:

"Love is above right and wrong. When love burns in the souls of a man and a woman, God himself can't say no. All my life I've waited for the eternal moment when love would engulf my whole soul like a whirlwind, and it's come—the moment when I can seize you in my arms and kiss your face and hair, because I'm stronger than you and because I love you..."

The stage darkens, and Roland's voice fades away into nothingness. There is sudden darkness. Then suddenly the light returns. The characters are in the same positions. Howells indicates that he has been letting the others know the truth in their own souls. Milborn announces that, while Mary and he were going to have a church wedding the next day, they were already married before a magistrate that very morning. On this news, the curtain falls.

* * *

Act III of *Souls* takes place in Milborn's library. The red lamp and the yellow lamp are lighted, as are the alcove lights.

Mary now wears a plain dark street suit and hat. The four characters have apparently just completed a conversation about their personal relationships with each other. Howells says talking over things quietly is the only sane thing for people to do. The only tragedies in life come from misunderstandings.

Milborn is under a nervous strain. With a sudden burst of unpleasant laughter he calls their conversation "damned ridiculous." He is sick of Howells' ghastly talk about souls. When Roland says everything's seemed like a dream, a sort of psychic fantasy, Milborn says: "Yes, like a dream and yet horribly real." He's suffered, real suffering, soul-suffering.

Mary and Roland say goodbye and leave. Milborn tells Howells he is damnably unhappy for he honestly cares for Mary. Milborn says Howells is still deluding himself, instead of looking his soul in the face. Milborn says his nerves do not permit him to listen to Howells' talk about souls. Howells' picture of the interior of his soul has stuck in Milborn's mind. He has visions of it sometimes, hallucinations. It chokes him, the eternal picture of a black place with high narrow walls closing him in, closing him in... Howells tells Milborn to brace up and forget: "Don't act like a sick fool." Howells leaves.

Milborn sits quietly, then rises. He puts out the lights one by one. The stage is dark except for a narrow shaft of light which comes through the partly opened folding doors. Milborn passes out through these doors. He is seen in the lighted space. Then he moves out of sight, but he can be heard fumbling in the darkness. He strikes a match, revealing his paleface-and a revolver which shines in the matchlight. The match goes out. Milborn moves back into the shaft of light. He examines the revolver. He lifts it to his head. Pauses. Laughs quietly. Lowers the revolver. Throws it on the table. Picks it up. Looks at it with a contemplative smile...

as Mary appears and comes forward quietly. Then Roland.

They suppose Milborn was going to kill himself. He says he was merely testing his nerve. He felt like killing himself, but he

couldn't. For one thing, he didn't have the nerve. For another, the revolver wasn't loaded. Milborn wanted to kill himself because he's disgusted, tired and jealous. Jealous of Roland, who now has Mary, money and fame.

Milborn says it seems as if everything had happened that very evening, not two years before. He reminds Mary he did what was right: he accepted their divorce, he tried to be unselfish. Mary says they should all try to be friends and suggests Milborn get rid of the revolver, which he does by suddenly throwing it through the windows with a crash.

Mary wishes Milborn would be less bitter.

"I'm not bitter against you, Mary /Milborn says/. It's against things. Life. Against my own soul. For the last two years I've lived practically alone with my own soul. Since my mother died, I haven't seen anyone except Howells—and he's very unsympathetic—he's too truthful. It's grown to be a sort of obsession with me, that idea of the interiors of souls, it preys upon my mind, it's made me bitter, disgusted..."

Milborn finds it strange that the thing which has been the cause of his unhappiness has been the cause of Roland's success and fame—Roland's play, about the interior of souls, was based on the idea he got from Howells. Milborn envies Roland his accomplishment; he himself has spent all his life wanting to accomplish something, but he's never done it. Roland is a success; he, Milborn, is a failure.

Milborn tries to be a little less bitter. He then mentions the proofsheets of Roland's book of poems which he has kept and he suggests he will keep his promise to pay for publishing them., Milborn goes out to get the poems.

Mary and Roland are pleased that they can be friends with Milborn, whom they haven't forgotten even in their own happiness. They are very happy. "Because there's nothing in our souls but love—love—love." They embrace just as Milborn reappears. As he stands looking silently at the two lovers, the final curtain descends on *Souls*.