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<td>Citation</td>
<td>経営と経済, 59(4), pp.101-122; 1980</td>
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<td>Issue Date</td>
<td>1980-03-01</td>
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<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10069/28086">http://hdl.handle.net/10069/28086</a></td>
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JOHN HOWARD LAWSON’S THE MAD MOON (1917)

Le Roy Robinson

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

The present article describes for the first time The Mad Moon, a copyrighted (July 11, 1917) but unpublished and unproduced play which Lawson began sometime in 1916, when he was about 22 years old, and which he may have worked on as late as 1920, when he was 24.

This description provides historians of American drama with an example of Lawson’s early writing which has both biographical and historical interest.

The Mad Moon was written for the commercial theatre, into which Lawson was introduced by Mary Kirkpatrick, a dramatist’s agent, who was his first “mentor” in Broadway theatrical techniques.

Lawson’s own rationale for The Mad Moon is probably expressed in The Spice of Life, also first written about 1916, copyrighted October 22, 1919. In one version of this play, its main character Mary Jefferson says:

Life is like a play. In fact, life is better than a play. Plays are generally all in one key. Life changes and moves and shifts. My life is like a lot of plays mixed together, changing according to mood and fancy. One minute it’s farce. Then melodrama, romance.

In another version, Mary Jefferson puts it this way:

I once almost eloped with a dramatist. Nat a successful one. His plays were different, wonderful, clever, a little bit odd. Producers called them fantastic and silly. But they weren’t that. They were full of variety. The dramatist said life was like a lot of
plays mixed together, farces and problem plays and frothy comedies, and that is what his plays were like. As for unity, plays stopped having unity 20 years ago. Plays now go forwards or backwards. Artistic unity is unfashionable. Besides there is no artistic unity in life. Life changes and shifts and moves and changes. 1)

John Howard Lawson later became the most trenchant critic of his own early work in the commercial theatre. In Theory and Technique of Playwriting (1936) he censures (similar) plays whose action is "illustrative and not functional," "illustrative rather than progressive," because "contradiction between cause and effect is not dramatized as it strikes the conscious wills of the characters and drives them to revise and intensify their decisions." In Theory and Technique Lawson rejects plays in which characters are governed by whim or fate, rather than by "conscious will," plays in which psychic generalizations are substituted for specific acts of will, plays in which action tends to follow a pattern of repetition. Lawson rejects the mode of thought which in drama accepts emotional drift as a substitute for rational causation; which in drama shows a "series of situations in which the immediacy of sensation, the fleeting feeling of frustration or anger or desire takes precedence over the testing and carrying out of decisions." Lawson approvingly quotes John Gassner: "A play lives by its logic and reality. Conceptual confusion is the disease that halts its pace, dulls its edge, and disturbs its balance." About this "disease," Lawson adds: "The disease is a nervous disorder growing out of the playwright's maladjustment to his environment."

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1) Interestingly, film producer Cecil B. DeMille's first talking picture, Dynamite, written mostly by John Howard Lawson in 1928, has been described as an "astonishing mixture, with artificiality vying with realism, and comedy hanging on the heels of grim melodrama." Mordaunt Hall, "Cecil B. DeMille's First Talker," New York Times, December 28, 1929.
The action of Act I of *The Mad Moon* \(^2\) occurs in "An Ordinary Place" - a living room in an old suburban house whose interior, remodelled, appears neither new nor old but eminently neutral and proper. The walls are dark brown. The comfortable furniture is yellow. In a large fireplace burns a dull fire.

In front of the fireplace sits Alonzo Sheffield, Senior, a 50-year-old conservative New England gentleman, dressed in black. Senior has just finished dinner. Comfortable, he leans back in his chair and looks at the fire. Thinking, he counts on his fingers. Shuts his eyes. Stops counting. Falls asleep. Snores, very loudly.

Enters Alonzo Sheffield, Junior. Alonzo, about 30, resembles his father, over whom he now stands, as the older man's jaw drops, his wide open mouth, a gaping cavity, shocking Alonzo.

Enters Mrs. Alice Sheffield, a straight, uncompromising woman who has the look of one who has always done her duty. \(^3\)

Mrs. Sheffield thought her husband's snoring was thunder. Alonzo says it might rain: "It's a queer night." Senior, awakened, apologizes for dozing off thinking: "... a maniac in the family is a great responsibility." Mrs. Sheffield, thankful the maniac is only a nephew, considers his insanity the Will of God. (Both men bow their heads meekly.)

As a lawyer, Alonzo assures his parents the courts will in proper form declare the maniac insane and place him -- and his property -- in the Sheffields' charge. Senior says: "Yes, we're doing our duty."

Alonzo prepares to visit Priscilla Emerson, whom he will ask to be

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2) This description of *The Mad Moon* is based on a microfilm copy of two typed manuscripts, two differing versions of the play, both apparently undated. The microfilm was made available to me by Dr. Kenneth W. Duckett, Curator, Special Collections, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

This description omits numerous entrances and exits, and omits numerous short scenes, and shortens others considerably.

3) She is the prototype of Aunt Bertha, the puritanical Christian Scientist from New England, who appears in *A New England Fantasy* (1924) and in its successor, *Nirvana* (1926). *The Mad Moon* is a forerunner of both of these plays.
his wife. For Alonzo, marriage is a matter of common sense. He and Priscilla are suited: they're both "thinkers" and both like cocoa for breakfast. "It's the little things that count."

His parents, pleased, agree there's nothing better for a man than the influence of a good woman. But Mrs Sheffield has noticed Priscilla's absence from church lately. She considers Priscilla inclined to be flighty, independent.

As Alonzo opens the outside door, a grey evening is revealed, and he repeats it's a queer night and leaves.

Soon a visitor arrives. Isabella Pernee, a slim attractive dark-complexioned woman of 34, speaks English with the pleasant trace of a Spanish accent. Mrs Sheffield considers Isabella inclined to be indiscreet for walking out alone in the evening. People talk. When Isabella first arrived in town there was gossip about her, her being a foreigner. Isabella admits still being very much a stranger in town. Mrs Sheffield consoles: "It's easy to tell a righteous woman... even if she is Spanish."

Isabella returns a borrowed book on Siamese culture. The book is about missionaries in the Orient. Mrs Sheffield and Isabella are on a committee raising money for a replacement for its writer, recently eaten by cannibals. Isabella has been thinking about becoming a missionary herself. She would like to do good in China. They would not eat her in China. The women go to the library to look at other books about missionaries.

4) Later in this scene Senior says marriage always settles a man. Anyway, it settled him.
5) One story about Isabella that Senior now calls a foolish lie was that she was a disguised snake charmer.
6) Lawson's light slap here at nativism is given again a little harder in Roger Bloomer and Processional (1925).
7) Senior jokes: "I didn't know the Siamese had any culture. I thought they only had twins." Isabella smiles but Mrs Sheffield is pained.
8) Isabella says they would like to find a big man. "The cannibals will appreciate him." There is a twinkle in her eyes.
As Senior stretches and yawns, Olga the maid pleads not to be dismissed for her constant failure to answer the door on time. When Olga gives an "unaccountably unrestrained" laugh, Senior cautions her this is an orderly house and she must be prompt and proper.

Reginald Sheffield now lets himself in with his own key. A year younger than his brother Alonzo, he has a hurried business-like manner, always serious. He takes a good look at Olga, who takes a good look at him, too.

Reginald reports the results of his trip to New York. "Father, ... your nephew Thomas Weed is a total loss..." Reginald talked, begged, argued, threatened, but Thomas has no desire to buck up, no desire to be ambitious. As a businessman, Reginald thinks the sooner they get Thomas declared insane the better. Senior agrees: "To allow an insane man to do what he wishes with $300,000 is an insult to society." 9)

Alonzo returns with Priscilla Emerson. 10) Priscilla, whose cheeks are red and whose hair is golden, has a natural sparkle and health, which is charming, but her manner is subdued. She refuses to be Alonzo's wife. She does not love him. Alonzo thinks she loves him "all that's necessary." She should be sensible, he says, and should not look for a passion that will stir the stars.

Priscilla is not looking for that kind of passion. She shall never marry. She will become a "social nun." She will give her life to help People -- the poor. 11) Alonzo thinks puttering around in the slums all

9) Reginald says Thomas threw a $50 bill out the window before his very eyes.
Senior: "Did you recover the bill?" Reginald: "No, it was a windy day."
Senior frowns.
10) Priscilla Emerson appears under the same name in A New England Fantasy and Nirvana.
11) In his autobiography Lawson says his mother was concerned about the problems of slum children. On June 24, 1909, Lawson visited Jane Addams's Hull House in Chicago, and from his chaperone Mary Sicard Jenkins, principal of the Halsted School in Yonkers, he undoubtedly learned about settlement work.
one's life is unhealthy. A woman is meant to marry and have children; it's the only way she can be happy. \(^{12}\) Alonzo says Priscilla's intention is a "martyrdom." If all young girls did the same, what would become of the dignity of the home, the future of the human race?

Priscilla asks about Tommy (Thomas), her childhood playmate. The Sheffields explain Tommy's insanity. Tommy is dangerous; he has fits of temper and whims and criminal impulses.

The front door rings, and rings again, many short odd assorted tingles. Alonzo opens the door. "A figure is outlined...against the grey mist." \(^{13}\)

Tommy Weed is in his early 20s, rather thin and a little under medium height. He is an odd young man with a twisted smile and merriment in his eyes, and he is charming.

Tommy says he has come from the moon. There's nothing easier than to slide down a moonbeam. He has come for friendship. He would sing a song about friendship or one about love. He says the others are not glad to see him, or they'd want to sing. In the Bible, that nice old book, whenever people want to express joy, they sing--the timbrel, the harp, and -- the ukelele!

The Sheffields are far from amused by Tommy's attempt to enliven an unnecessarily solemn occasion, and Tommy says their house is "simply stifling." \(^{14}\)

Alonzo thinks it fortunate Tommy has come where he can be kept under proper supervision. Mrs. Sheffield: "Perhaps it's God's Will." Tommy again explains his visit.

He was riding by on a little yellow cloud through the purple sky

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\(^{12}\) He adds that human beings are not meant to be violently merry, anyway.

\(^{13}\) Lawson uses a similar stage device in numerous plays, e.g., at the beginning of Standards the figure of the dramatist is silhouetted against the evening sunset.

\(^{14}\) The main female character of The Spice of Life (1919) says much the same thing about her home and her life.
and a ray of moonlight fell on the house, so he shouted "helter skelter" to make the cloud stop. The cloud stopped and dropped him on a bed of azaleas in their garden. He thought there was his chance to be the Prodigal Son.

Senior doesn't see any repentance in Tommy, and Tommy doesn't see any fatted calf in the room, either.

Alonzo explains the family's plan for Tommy's welfare. Someone will take care of him. He'll be dressed nicely. Fed. Watched over, carefully. Alonzo diagnoses Tommy's condition as "hypomania" or "depressive insanity." The Sheffields have kept close track of Tommy.

Alonzo. Endless silliness.
Senior. Waste.
Reginald. Dissipation.
Mrs. Sheffield. You go among women who smoke cigarettes.
Alonzo. Riotous living

(Tommy thinks it's better to riot then to rot.)

Tommy announces all his money is gone.

"By slight of hand. I put it in a hat. I shook it. Whsst. Gone."
He gave some of his money away. He threw some of it away: he tossed some of it into the craters of the moon. Carelessly.
"You can't be happy unless you're careless." Now he is poor.
It's less comfortable ("Comfort is for pigs") but it's more exciting ("Excitement is for men"). He is now a vagabond.

Senior and Alonzo hurry out to telephone a banker to confirm Tommy's financial situation.

Tommy warns Priscilla to take care of herself: "Draw magic circles all around." For he may be the devil.15) Tommy remembers with

15) In Servant-Master-Lover—a novelist writes a novel entitled The Prince of Darkness. In Nirvana novelist Bill Weed (Tommy is his prototype) says: "What if I am the Devil? It's the devil's time." In Success Story (1932) advertising writer Sol Ginsburg early feels himself "sold to the devil" and later chooses (he says) to go to the devil.
startling distinctness how Priscilla kissed him goodbye in the very middle of a crimson sunset.\textsuperscript{16} It was a truthful kiss. "Most kisses simply chirp like canaries but that kiss soared like a lark."

Priscilla says Tommy puzzles her. She wonders if he is insane. He certainly is not normal. Tommy, angered, says she ought to understand.

"I am insane. I do what I please. I say what I think. I'm a human being." Priscilla is a Puritan, Tommy says. He is a madman. She thinks and works. He shouts and laughs. "Madness is my philosophy." He adds his philosophy is like himself—it is a joke.

Priscilla tells Mrs Sheffield Tommy is pretending to be more insane than he is, and she wants the Sheffields to give him every chance.

Tommy starts to explain himself to the Sheffields. He's frivolous. He's a fool. He's merry. But he's not vulgarly insane. He's a philosopher of mirth and moonlight.

Tommy suddenly asks: "Aunt Alice, have you ever done anything mad in your life?" His aunt replies: "Heaven forbid." Has she ever done anything she enjoyed? She says she has done her duty: "A good woman is so busy doing good she doesn't wish to do anything else."

Tommy thinks the Sheffields are governed by fear. They are afraid of God. They are dreadfully afraid of the Devil. They are afraid of death. They are afraid to live. Their common sense, as they call it, doesn't make any allowance for the unexpected. They don't know that because they're stupid. All they know is facts. They've got knowledge but not an ounce of wisdom. "Wisdom is to be careless, to see what is funny and what is beautiful."

Tommy predicts: "One of these days you'll all go mad. "It's not

\textsuperscript{16} In \textit{Roger Bloomer} Louise Chamberlain waves goodbye to Roger as the red sun sets. In \textit{Nirvana} Bill Weed reminds Priscilla Emerson that when he left home she kissed him in the apple orchard in the middle of a red sunset.
natural to act as if one is made of tin. "There is dynamite in the heart of every one of you. One spark and the tin will burst and you'll flame up." 17)

One of these day the moon will get them. Dull people live on the earth. Tommy lives on the moon with the fools and the poets. The moon is a crazy place--drafty--but the people who live there love it. It's destined that even the most serious people have a moment of madness. The whim comes and something sings and they forget all the rules.

Tommy suddenly turns to Isabella: "This woman talks religion" but "she's got the passion of a tigress in her eyes." Someday the tigress will break out of the cage.

Priscilla wonders: "Suppose some supernatural power should turn us all insane." 18) Alonzo tells her to forget this foolish idea.

Senior reports Tommy's financial affairs are complicated and he and Alonzo go to consult a local banker for advice.

Tommy tells Priscilla he adores her. Weird silver moonlight creeps into the room, touching Priscilla. "The mad moon!" Tommy cries. "The mad, lover's moon!"

Priscilla says everything's queer. She feels as if there's electricity in the air. 19)

Tommy seizes Priscilla's hand. Wouldn't she like to be free? Isn't she sick of sanity, convention, dullness and decency? "Let this be your moment of madness." He wants her to come away with him--he doesn't know where--to chase a star to follow a wave of the sea. He says her heart is a living flame she should

17) The reference in this speech to dynamite throws additional light on the character of Dynamite Jim in Processional; and the reference to spark throws light on the character of Annabel Sparks in The Pure in Heart (1934).
18) In Nirvana Janet Galt says "something outside reality may become real...to give us a new direction."
19) In Nirvana Lawson develops the theme of electricity in the air at great length, suggesting a philosophy based on electricity
let burn. He would like to save her from becoming a mummy. If he were Pan, fluting joy to the stars, Pan, in the streets of Boston, naked, grapes in his hair...

Priscilla, shocked, says Pan was a heathen god, besides he’s dead. Her calm is cracking under strain. She thinks this is all a nightmare. She says she is quite dizzy.  

Tommy says women are either old maids or dryads. A dryad has mad hair. She sips honey. She trembles. She laughs. She runs like the whisper of a wind. Priscilla is a dryad, he says. The tilt of her nose is a dryad tilt, a mad tilt, a moon nose. If he were Pan he’d pipe her to wonderland.

Tommy asks Priscilla to come away with him and laugh. “Fear and prudence are dead. You and I are alive. Let this be your moment of madness. We’ll go wherever the wind leads us.” Without a future. Without a reason. Without a cent. The only real gold is the gold of her hair, the only silver the silver of the moon. “I give you all I have--carelessness, chance, kisses.” The mad moon is calling them. Will she come?

A wild impulse overwhelms Priscilla. She goes to Tommy and holds him close. She laughs (not an ordinary laugh) and, as the curtain descends, she says: “This is my moment of madness.”

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The action of Act II of *The Mad Moon* takes place in “An Extraordinary Place”. In contrast to the formal precision of the previous

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20) In *Nirvana* Priscilla Emerson, climbing in a high place, gets dizzy, falls upon electric wires, falls farther, and is seriously injured.

21) In another version of *The Mad Moon* Tommy enacts the role of Pan in a fantasy entitled "If I Were Pan." (When he was about 11 or 12 years old John Howard Lawson saw Maude Adams in *Peter Pan.*)

22) In another version of *The Mad Moon* the first act ends as Tommy and Priscilla look into the fireplace, where even in New England people can see dreams--and they are transported into a fantasy of the "romance behind all the fireplaces in the world."
setting the present setting now strikes a chord of romance, and one might even think the scene was supernatural.

Grey darkness. Grey, mysterious, twisted, black trees, whose ghostly branches obscure the moonlight which shines on one spot only, a circle of silvery brightness.\(^{23}\)

The rough circle of bright moonlight forms a clearly defined little setting.\(^{24}\) The light shifts gradually and raggedly into the shadows, where the swaying branches cause flickers of moonlight to come and go. Outside the circle everything is weird and grey. The crimson embers of a smoldering fire\(^ {25}\) contrast redly with the pale silver of the moonlight.

Vague sounds recur now and then throughout the act, sounds characteristic of autumn evenings outdoors--frogs in a distant swamp, crickets, an occasional owl.

Senior appears out of the shadows. Then Alonzo, dishevelled. He hops into the circle of moonlight, balancing awkwardly on one foot to remove a cricket from his boot. He asks: "What's the use of wandering about in these black woods looking for Priscilla?" Both agree it's a topsy-turvy night, and exit.

Tommy and Priscilla arise "like Punch and Judy" from behind an old broken stone wall. Priscilla is unrestrained. She laughs. She takes an animal joy in the moonlight and the leaves and the darkness. Tommy says: "Here we are --you and I and the moon."

Tommy fears Priscilla will vanish--goddesses have a way of vanishing. She'll dissolve into a rose-colored flame and rise through the sky. "Goddess, I worship at your feet," he says, and kisses her foot.\(^ {26}\) They kiss. "When a goddess kisses a mortal, it

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23) In a college short story "The Wrong Cue" (Williams Literary Monthly, June 1913) Lawson's main character enters a church, dark except where a "circle of light was cast by the candles that flickered above the altar."

24) Specifically, "not more than 15 feet in diameter."


26) In Servant-Master-Lover Cinders, the teen-age heroine, has the Servant kiss her foot.
either kills him like a thunderbolt or makes him live forever."

Priscilla has given Tommy immortality.

This is a mad night--a night when there's magic in the atmosphere--a night of love--a night when the whole world comes under the spell of laughing and dancing and kissing--and love.

Tommy then "lugubriously" suggests they decide their "domestic future." (Priscilla says: "Let's dig a grave here and bury all our domestic problems.") The moonlight is silver, but their outlook is grey. They are pursued. They have no clothes. They have no money for a marriage license. And they can't get one at night.

Priscilla says: "Meanwhile we'll live in the cozy little hole with the dead leaves where we were hiding." Tommy objects: dead leaves are damp. Besides, they are not moles. Priscilla says from then on they are moles, and she crouches down to act like one. Tommy says she's acting more like a rabbitt. This is all right with her for they can still live in the hole with the trees singing above them.

Tommy says they'll walk across the big hills and through the woods until they find a farm house. They'll knock on the door -- and Priscilla says, they'll say they're tired lovers who came from the moon -- and, Tommy says, the farmer will give them lodging for the night.

Tommy again mentions money. They need five dollars. One for a lodging, two for a marriage license, two for a minister. Priscilla says: "Steal it." Tommy: "Too dangerous." Priscilla wonders what's the use of being mad if they can't do as they please. She's beginning to consider Tommy prudent.

Tommy will go to borrow money from an old man who lives in a cottage in the nearby village who's been his friend ever since he was a small boy. Priscilla will creep stealthily like a cat and go home for a toothbrush, dresses, hairpins, underwear, shoes and a nailfile.

Tommy reminds her they are "outlaws" and cautions her to be careful.

27) Tommy calls this man "Old Arthur Jennings."
They promise to meet later in the moon's enchanted circle. Their signal will be the chorus of a mad song written by Tommy called "The Moon."

They sing and dance and dally
In every silver valley
They play at hide and seek
From peak to golden peak.

As they exit, a woman's voice is heard offstage singing some "uncanny" lullaby. The woman, Olga the maid, enters. Visible in the red firelight, she looks wild, with a fierce buoyancy. She stands in the moonlight, hands to her breast. She takes a deep breath and holds her hands out in a "free gesture." She loves the outdoors. She wishes she were an animal with fur and padded feet and a nose that could smell anything. She sighs and runs her hand through her hair.

As she exits, Alonzo and Mrs Sheffield enter, both unstrung. They hear Olga's singing and they see the shadow of a woman which Alonzo pursues.

Mrs Sheffield wraps her shawl tighter and sits on a stump near a watertrough. She covers her face completely with the shawl. An owl calls. She peeks out, and looks at the moon. The owl calls again. She shivers. Gradually she relaxes. She sighs and stretches out her arms. Smiles wildly. The owl calls again. She tries to imitate its sound. She tries again, doing her imitation better and more joyfully. She seems transformed, under a spell.

Alonzo enters, pulling Priscilla roughly. He's trying to hurt her. He'll use force if she tries to run away. He'll use a big stick. He drags her off into the darkness.

Olga rushes into the lighted circle, standing like a wild animal, uncertain. Reginald, behind her, pounces on her. She twists around, bringing her face close to his. He apologizes: he pounced because he thought she was Priscilla. Olga: "You ought to look before you pounce."

Olga tells him how much she likes wild things. He says she's the
wildest thing he ever saw. Olga says she liked his being rough-and asks him to do it again. They look at each other, deeply thrilled. Olga: "You're a man and I'm a woman and we're both alive." They kiss. Olga: "Isn't it great to be alive?" Reginald is just finding that out. They kiss. Reginald speaks like a man in a dream: "Wonderful." They kiss. Reginald tries to write a poem: "Passion...fashion...beauty...duty...stars and bars..."28) 

Olga can't keep still. 29) All the little things in the woods are jumping and hopping, and she can't help hopping, too. She starts to sing her wild song, and they exit together. Hopping.


Senior enters, then Isabella, excitedly.

Isabella feels he is the only man she can trust with anything. But she may be a dangerous woman. (She consciously plays the siren, and Senior is thrilled and nervous.) She feels queer, maybe it's the bright moon making them a little wild. She admits three or four years before in Spain where some men called her "devil woman"30) she danced mad dances and drank strong wine. 31) She did wicked things. She has sins to remember. But the devil in her died, and the woman remained. She became ill, "like a skeleton." When a woman is sick, she thinks of virtue. So she came to New England where everybody is good, where she has been good. Until tonight, when the devil in her is gay. She laughs and raises her arms wildly and runs—but stumbles.

28) In the Act II setting of Nirvana the "distant silver of scattered stars" blinks "as through the black bars of a foreboding but unfinished prison."

29) In this, Olga foreshadows teenager Sadie Cohen in Processional who can't keep still either.

30) "Dama Diablo"/sic/.

31) Lawson took this line from a well-known fin de siecle poem.
Senior lets her lean on him and they exit.

Tommy rises, scratches his head thoughtfully, then ducks down into hiding as Mrs Sheffield enters.

She sees a still lighted cigarette on the ground, picks it up, holds it vaguely, starts to throw it away, but seized by impulse she takes a whiff, coughs, looks around, takes another whiff, likes it. She realizes she's smoking in bright moonlight, so moves into the shadows.

Senior enters carrying Isabella in his arms. She is quite limp.

Isabella says her heart "goes weak." Senior feels her heart. He says his heart has gone wild. He is mad with love. He urges her to go away with him, he doesn't know where, some land where they can forget and be happy. His wife doesn't matter. "Don't you want life and freedom?" They can be free in some sunny little Southern paradise.

Mrs Sheffield laughs wildly and enters the circle of light shaking with amusement. Her husband is as big a fool as she always thought he was. Senior asks why he shouldn't have his share of sunlight. Of youth. He feels the "cosmic urge." Wanderlust. They exit.

Tommy rises, disconsolate. In a voice of "genuine pathos" he calls Priscilla's name. Out of the darkness, Priscilla's voice calls his name. Priscilla then enters the lighted circle, her hair down her back. "We're Free," she says. "Free to follow chance where it leads."

Tommy is not so sure now. Watching his relatives became babbling fools has made him think. He wants Priscilla to see the future. She does: "A vista of radiant dreams." Tommy's vision is less bright: "Wherever there's a rainbow, you find a storm. Our future is a mystery of dreams, but also there is storm, uncertainty, black toil." 32) Priscilla has been protected all her life. She's leaving duties, friends, comforts. (Priscilla says: "I

32) In a college poem "The Muses" (Williams Literary Monthly, January 1911) Lawson writes: the muses form "Glittering dreams of mad delight, / Dreams, dark with the omen of storm."
am ready.

What right has he to take her away from all that? What security can he offer her? "Life doesn't consist in throwing roses. Life is a battle with steel." 33) He swears to protect her forever with his blood. He will work for her like a slave. But he has never proved what he can do. He is a tramp and a fool.

Priscilla says Tommy is trying to run away from her.

Tommy explains two kinds of love: possession and sacrifice. "I would rather make the sacrifice than enjoy the possession." Priscilla plucks a bright red tiger lily from a bush and holds it out to him: "Supposing I should say go?" Tommy humbly says: "I am nothing. I am dust. 34) I am your footstool." Priscilla gives him the flower and says with great passion: "Don't you think there's any sacrifice in my love? I care nothing for safety. I care nothing for comfort. I am ready to die or starve."

Tommy says they are mad, but he wonders if the enchantment will last. Priscilla says it will last forever. Tommy doubts that, for a woman changes, her affection is a flower that dies: "The scarlet blossom burns and then the petals turn to ashes."

Priscilla. I give myself to you forever.
Tommy. And I - I give you nothing.
Priscilla. I ask nothing. My love is not a bargain, it is a flame.
Tommy. I shall be worthy.
Priscilla. I am ready to follow you in rags on all the roads of the world. I will be your mirror and your shadow.
Tommy. I am your slave.
Priscilla. I give you the three gifts of myself--my heart and my body and my soul.
Tommy. Although we grow weary, we shall not forget laughter. Although we grow old, we shall not forget love.

33) In a college essay "The Zest for Argument" (Williams Literary Monthly, January 1912) Lawson writes: "Conflict is the law of life."
34) In A New England Fantasy Tommy Weed says he refuses to be a lump of dust drawn into a vacuum.
They embrace, but they hear someone coming, and they have to hide in their hole.

Senior enters, prepared to "elope" alone. Reginald and Olga enter, debating whether to elope together. Tommy confronts them commandingly.

They're all as crazy as June bugs... They've gone mad... If Reginald takes the train tonight with Olga, it means sin... They'll regret it forever.

Tommy tells them all to go home in the name of common sense... They've made him sane... They've made him see how dangerous it is to be mad... Do they think they can run in the face of convention for the sake of an hour's whim?... Don't they realize they owe a duty to themselves and to their families? Don't they understand honor?

Tommy warns: "A storm is coming that will shake the sky."

Portents of storm are in evidence as the stage darkens, as wind moves high up in the trees, as scurrying clouds now and then partially obscure the moonlight. The fire is completely dead.

All exit, Olga laughing wildly and singing: "Rain, rain, go away!"

Priscilla now says Tommy's speech to the would-be elopers convinced her how dangerous it is to be mad.

What she said before was true. She loves Tommy, and she always will. But they cannot follow their desire. If would be wrong, weak and sinful. She'd be a burden to him forever. They've been foolish. Now they must be strong and sane. It's been a mad dream, but her madness is dead. Just the way the moon will die when the tempest wipes it out.

Priscilla goes home.

Tommy is stunned and broken by her sudden change. He takes from his pocket the red flower she'd given him. "Ashes! The flower turns to ashes!" He crumples the flower in his hand. The red petals fall to the ground. Tommy makes a gesture of despair. The moonlight fades, grows grey. The moon is erased in blackness. With a rush
the whirlwind is on him. 35) There is the roaring of wind and rain. The curtain falls on Act II of *The Mad Moon*.

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The action of the third act of *The Mad Moon* occurs in "An Ordinary Place" -- the same setting as in Act I, the living room of the Sheffields' house. Outside a violent storm vents its fury.

Hardly anything is visible in the parlor. There are a few dull embers in the fireplace. Figures troop into the dark room. A confused mingling of voices: home--at last--drowned--what a night--most awful storm in years.

The lights are turned on, showing ringing wet, dejected people, each in an attitude of complete misery, each ashamed of what has occurred.

There is a discussion of wetness--on none of them is a square inch left dry--all of them are dripping on the carpet--nothing is as untidy as water--inconvenient to be wet, except in the proper place, like a bathtub--change clothes--All of them acting as if nothing worse than wetness had occurred, but Senior fears there is a stirring of bitterness underneath.

Priscilla arrives. She has repented. Alonzo: "Thank God." Senior: "Amen."

Tommy wanders in aimlessly. He picks up a book from which he wants to read passages about moral courage and religious fortitude and peace--but he's not permitted to do so. Tommy notes the Sheffields have gone sane again. If they'd gone on much longer out there, a real murder or a real poem might have been committed. 36) Tommy will not leave before speaking with Priscilla.

Priscilla asks Alonzo to marry her, anytime he likes. Alonzo says the

35) In a college poem "Invictus" (*Williams Literary Monthly*, February 1912)
Lawson wrote: "I stand alone and fearless in the whirlwind of the years."

36) In *Souls* (1915) psychologist Howells says the only difference between a murderer and an artist (a poet) is that a murderer makes people dead and an artist makes people uncomfortable.
both of them went through a lot out there, and it's taught him one thing—"my feeling for you is very deep and very romantic." That is, all in all, he loves her. On her side, Priscilla will not pretend she feels an overwhelming passion, but she trusts him: "We can be comrades. Make a home. Is that enough?" For Alonzo, it is. Alonzo announces their engagement to his parents.

Mrs. Sheffield pathetically asks her husband a queer question, vital to her: "Do you admire women of my type as much as feminine women?" Senior is pleased by her jealousy: she must have a real affection for him. In their thirty years of marriage they never talked much about affection, they just lived together comfortably. Senior assures his wife she is his ideal of womanly virtue. She melts.

Reginald warns Olga the maid to be respectable in the future and very quiet: "Don't tell about you and me." He adds: "Don't brag about me." Olga is now aware he is afraid of her.

Reginald informs Tommy the Sheffields have decided to drop the idea of placing him in an asylum. Alonzo informs Tommy Priscilla wants him to go away. Tommy says human beings are full of change; Priscilla will change her mind. Meanwhile he will sing her a serenade until she appears.

During the whole time Tommy sings the "mad song" that follows, the Sheffields, one by one, interrupt him, more or less violently, trying to stop him. Without success. He sings to the end.

The world's a serious place.
It's full of decorum and grace.
Whenever you smile
It's considered the style
To smile on the front of your face.
It's a regular rule.
And they'll say you're a fool
If you smile at the back of your cranium.
They'll say you are mad
And they'll put you (too bad)
Inside an asylum insanium.
But the moon!
The moon is the mother of Laughterness,
Dwelling of Dafterness,
Shrine of all fools,
Without worries or rules.
They sing and dance and dally
In every silver valley.
They play at hide and seek
From peak to golden peak.
And every moonlit minute
Is the middle of next week

The world is a solemn old sphere.
It is dull when you've been here a year.
To eat peas and pork
With a knife and a fork
Is a tiresome habit, it's clear.
But if you should eat
With the toes of your feet
A pot of fresh paste or a piece of a pillow
They'll say he is gone
And they'll hang you at dawn
From a tree of conventional willow.

But the moon!
Each man is as mad as a hatter is.
That's all the matter is.
Why if anyone chose
He'd take tea with his nose.
Of course it might spatter — no matter.
On the moon one soon grows
JOHN HOWARD LAWSON’S  *THE MAD MOON* (1917)  

To play flutes with his toes  
Or to smile at the back of his cranium  
Or imbibe purple ink  
(It’s a health-giving drink)  
Or eat salad all made of geranium.

But the moon!  

Priscilla at last appears and says she’s promised to marry Alonzo. Tommy wishes her the joy of birds and the carelessness of moonlight and hopes she’ll forget him easily and quickly. Priscilla says she can’t do that, but she can live for the right, for duty and honor. Their flight was funny and wonderful, but it was a sin. "Sacrifice is the essence of life."

Tommy says she sacrifices herself to a little tin god of convention when she could be burning her (pagan) soul to silver ashes on the altar of the stars. Money or walls cannot separate lovers, but when they are divided by ideas, it is hopeless. He will walk the world with a memory of magic. And he has a lingering certainty Priscilla will change her mind: "A million mad tomorrows are waiting."

Tommy opens the outside door. "The orange yellow disc of the descending moon, large and brilliant, shines straight down the path between the hedges outside." Tommy’s figure is outlined against the shining globe. He moves down the path. He is despondent. But he starts to whistle the tune of his mad song. "The retreating figure melts into the molten gold of the moon and is lost."

Everyone on stage is motionless and speechless. Then Alonzo says: "The madness has gone." Priscilla, lost in thought, hardly hears Alonzo suggest a date for their wedding. She can still choose, she says—a million mad tomorrows. or a sensible life. She laughs hysterically.

Priscilla looks undecidedly at the door Alonzo goes through and
also at the door Tommy went through. She runs, wildly, to the front door, almost opens it, stops. She walks, primly, to Alonzo's door, her hands folded as if in prayer. She turns to Tommy's door with a wild gesture of freedom. A look of unrestrained abandon comes into her eyes. She smiles wildly.

With a "gay, mad little laugh," Priscilla says: "I might."37) The curtain descends on *The Mad Moon.*

37) *Thunder Morning* (1953) ends as a lower middle class businessman thinks about joining the proletariat: "Could be!" is the final speech of the play.