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A Touch Of The Poet And More Stately Mansions



a touch of the poet & more stately mansions

eugene o'neill



Synopsis

A Touch of the Poet and More Stately Mansions are regarded as two of Eugene O'Neill's finest plays. Companion pieces, linked by characters and themes, they form part of a projected series of eleven interconnected plays in which the playwright intended to give a psychological and economic account of American life. Now these works, the only surviving plays in O'Neill's "Cycle," are brought together for the first time in a paperback volume. The version of More Stately Mansions presented here is O'Neill's unexpurgated text, scrupulously edited by Martha Gilman Bower, which restores the playwright's original opening scene, a crucial epilogue, and other material essential to our understanding of the play.

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Customer Reviews

A Touch of the Poet is the only completed work in what Eugene O'Neill hoped to make into a nine-play cycle entitled "A Tale of Possessors, Self-dispossessed." Set in 1828 near Boston, it centers around Con Melody, an Irish immigrant who takes pride in having served with distinction under Wellington in the war against Napoleon and who fancies himself as a distinguished gentleman despite all evidence to the contrary. He is married to Nora, who he in some ways detests due to her peasant birth (Melody was born into a wealthy family, though it acquired that wealth rather unethically), and his grown daughter Sara is in love with Simon Harford, the son of a legitimately wealthy Yankee. Despite being severely in debt, Con insists on maintaining airs of gentlemanliness--he keeps a horse solely for the purpose of showing off, and, on the day the play is

set, he throws a lavish party in celebration of the anniversary of his moment of military glory--often at the expense of Nora and Sara. Despite Con's airs, Harford's snobbish father sees him for what he is and objects to Sara and Simon's impending marriage (an objection Simon would readily defy). This insult deeply offends Con, who storms off to Harford's house intending to challenge him to a duel instead of staying out of Sara and Simon's way as a caring father would.

The two texts in this volume, "A Touch of the Poet" and "More Stately Mansions," are the fifth and sixth (and only extant) parts of what was to have become an 11-play cycle tentatively called "A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed." Neither play was published or produced during O'Neill's lifetime, although "Poet" was staged (with Helen Hayes, Eric Portman, and Kim Stanley) in 1957 and is currently enjoying a revival in Manhattan, and an extensively abbreviated and heavily revised "Mansions" made its American debut (with Colleen Dewhurst, Ingrid Bergman, and Arthur Hill) in 1967. Even though he left fairly complete manuscripts behind, it's probably unfair to critique O'Neill's unpublished, unstaged work. Like most other playwrights, O'Neill revised and honed his plays during readings and rehearsals, gauging the success or failure of lines and scenes as they were delivered and performed by the actors. Even so, "A Touch of the Poet" turns out to be an unpolished gem. Its tragic hero, Cornelius Melody, is an Irish cavalry hero from the Napoleonic wars who moves to America and brings along his pretensions of being a "gentleman" in a young country with little use for the gentry. At the play's open, he is a shell of his former glory, running a tavern for the local riffraff and regaling an audience willing to endure his tales of heroism and high-living for a free round of drinks. His long-suffering wife bears the burden of his shattered dreams, and his proud daughter finds him little more than an embarrassment, rebelling against his goal of making her a finely bred lady. The dichotomy between Cornelius's delusions and his circumstances trap him in the same sort of schizophrenia that plagued John Loving, O'Neill's equally tragic hero in "Days Without End.

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