

“Isolated”: Tennessee Williams’s First Extant Published Short Story

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Tennessee Williams’s first published writing appeared in *The Junior Life*, the bi-weekly newspaper of the Ben Blewett Junior High School in St. Louis. Williams entered Blewett on March 31, 1924, just five days after his 13th birthday. Opened on September 14, 1917 and named for a former St. Louis Superintendent of Education (1908-1917), Blewett Junior High School was “among the most innovative schools in the country” (Leverich 64; Hale, “Tennessee” 515). A large school, Blewett enrolled more than 1,000 students when Williams matriculated and boasted a faculty of 51 in addition to Principal H. H. Ryan and Assistant Principal C. H. Sackett. Allean Hale has provided information on the school and Williams academic ability:

Pupils were grouped on the basis of intelligence tests and allowed to go through grades seven to nine in two or three years, according to ability. Tom tested 114 on the Terman I.I. test, a form of the Stanford-Binet intelligence tests, a grade well above average but not sufficiently high for the two year stream.¹

Each group competed for awards and other honors; class loyalty and academic achievement were the watchwords Blewett inculcated in the young Tom Williams. Studying art, choral music, Latin, and English composition, Williams was being well prepared for a life as a writer.

If Blewett was the pride of the St. Louis school system, then *The Junior Life* was the pride of Blewett Junior High. The paper was under the sponsorship of three teachers—Laura R. Thomure, who taught English; Eles Soecknick, who taught commercial subjects and math; and Edith C. Lowenstein, who taught English and math as well as serving as the paper’s business manager (“Faculty” 5). In *The Junior Life* for September 26, 1924, Martha Sudbrink, a ninth grader, eloquently stated the mission of the paper

as she pleaded for greater student participation in her short article entitled “*The Junior Life* as a School Paper,” which I reprint below:

The Junior Life is a school paper that was started to promote social fellowship among the students of this school. Former groups have all contributed as much material as possible. The reporters have been elected to help along, collect materials and develop in each group an idea of *The Junior Life*. The subscription price has always been cheap, so that each group may have as many subscribers as really wish to purchase the paper. All the authors' and poets' brains have been racked to find suitable material. This has all been done and more, too, in order to help the pupils. Suggestions for bettering the school, new rules, athletics, stories, poems, and plays, besides numerous other ideas have made *The Junior Life* in the past. The new pupils of the school are now expected to take on the work. Proper care should be taken to secure a reporter who will not only boost *Life*, but will have new ideas and suggestions. We wish the paper of our school to equal and even surpass other schools; and why should it not? It has been a custom, in the past, for each group to have a page to themselves. Keen competition has always been practiced, and group spirit comes to the front in order to make the group's page as fine as possible. Much is expected of the new groups, and we feel that they must take the place of former ones in *Junior Life* activities. New groups, find out who your good writers are, and boost them. All of us want to make this next year the best that has ever been for *Junior Life*.

To the aspiring young author Tom Williams, who had recently received a secondhand typewriter as a gift (Leverich 62), senior classmate Sudbrink's words must have been the clarion call to test his wings. Williams unquestionably paid attention to *The Junior Life*'s appeal to publish a variety of topics in a variety of genres. In his two years at Blewett, Williams appeared three times in *The Junior Life*—two poems “Nature's Thanksgiving” (November 7, 1925) and “Old Things” (January 22, 1926), both reprinted in Edwina Dakin Williams's *Remember Me to Tom*; and “Isolated” (November 7, 1924). George W. Crandell (*Descriptive Bibliography* 477) lists a fourth Williams appearance in *The Junior Life*—“A Great Tale Told at Katrina's Party” in an October 1924 issue—but since it is not to be found in any issue

of the paper, it should be more properly be labeled a ghost. Given the fact that there is no surviving copy of "A Great Tale," "Isolated" can, therefore, rightfully claim the honor of being Tennessee Williams's first extant published work and so deserves a much wider audience than just the Blewett students and faculty of 1924.² It is appropriate that Williams's first published work is now a part of the inaugural issue of *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, a journal devoted to the study and appreciation of his life and works.

The 251-word "Isolated" is the last story on page two of *The Junior Life*, following articles on "Improving the School," "No Trespassing," "Orchestra Club," and "The Eighth Grade Congress" and it immediately comes after a delightful piece on "My School Life in Germany" by seventh grader Alinde Cordes and a wicked note, "The A.B.C.'s," by another seventh grader, Louis Pultman, who gleefully recounted on how Mr. Svoboda caught his hair on fire when "suddenly the chemicals exploded." By contrast with these contributions, "Isolated," reprinted below, is artful and sophisticated.

Isolated

White Fan Island proved attractive to me for two reasons on that fateful Friday. First, the weather was very warm, and the island's cool white shores looked pleasant and inviting. Secondly, a little stump, protruding over the cliff, was an ideal fishing perch. It took me just fifteen minutes to row over to the island because the current was strong, due to the thaw in the far North. The island was just a bar of rock and sand; its hollows filled with sparkling water. I had chosen a bad time for fishing because no fish dared to loiter in that swirling race of waters.

The hot sand made me very weary, and I soon fell asleep. I was awakened by the sensation of coldness. The sun was setting shedding its golden rays over a vast wave of flood water. In the two hours of my sleep, the river had been changed into a roaring torrent of brown eddies. The water surrounded me for at least two miles. No wonder that I felt like Robinson Crusoe doomed to a life time of isolation.

My fears, however, were groundless. That night the flood was illumined from shore to shore by the torches of searching parties who were reclaiming dead bodies, and salvaging half-inundated

ground. After a long cold wait I was finally rescued by one of these searching parties. As we rowed back to the mainland, the waves washed over the last hillock of my erstwhile refuge.

Thomas L. Williams, 8th Gr.³

What kind of writing is “Isolated” and where did Williams ever get the idea for it? In his recent biography *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*, Lyle Leverich contends that “in all probability this was one of the ‘Class Exercises in Development of Paragraphs from Topical Sentences’ required by Miss Connor’s English Class” (65). Listing “Isolated” among Williams’s “First Appearances in Magazines and Newspaper,” Crandell calls it a “descriptive sketch of White Fan Island,” though he labels the unseen “Party” a story (477). Hale more properly calls “Isolation” a story (“Tennessee” 615). I would argue that “Isolated” is far more than an exercise in a composition class or a simple sketch of a place Williams visited. “Isolated” is a short story, or, to use the parlance of the late twentieth-century, a short short, or a form closer to a prose poem.

“Isolated” is more fiction than autobiography. There was no White Fan Island in St. Louis or anywhere else in Missouri for that matter, according to the *WPA Missouri Guide of 1941* or maps of the St. Louis area from the 1920s. According to Allean Hale, an alumna of Blewett and the University of Missouri several years after Williams attended these schools and a noted Williams’s biographer, “Tom might have recalled an island in the Meramec River or in a place in the Ozarks where he went to camp in the summers. Or it could have been a memory from Clarksdale, Mississippi or from summers near Knoxville. Too many possibilities. He probably just invented it” (Hale letter). Williams was innately talented at fictionalizing, something I believe he did in “Isolated,” and because of his fertile imagination he could adopt any number of fictive voices.

The first person narrator of “Isolated” exemplifies Williams’s early attempt to create a fictional character. Transforming what he may have seen or read, young Tom Williams created in “Isolated” a much abbreviated version of *Treasure Island*, or *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (he does introduce the comparison with Defoe in the second paragraph). This short story is his maiden attempt to join the ranks of authors whose narrator-characters navigated uncharted waters and survived to tell of the perils and tri-

umphs. A voracious reader, Williams doubtless read such adventure stories at Blewett or in his maternal grandfather's well-stocked library. In May 1927, just a year away from Blewett, Williams won third place from *Smart Set* magazine in New York for his letter "Can a Good Wife Be a Good Sport?," passing himself off in this composition as a contented married man, another fictional voice.

"Isolated" bears the hallmarks of many future Tennessee Williams's themes and plots. Throughout his life Williams persistently wrote about water; time and the river run deep in the canon. An avid swimmer, Williams vacationed near the water, purchased or rented houses and apartments with swimming pools, and relaxed through this sport. Moreover, the river around the fictional White Fan Island reflects Williams's paradoxical treatment of water, both its beauty ("Sparkling water," "ideal fishing") and its terror ("swirling race," "flood water," "roaring torrent"). In August 1928, he published in *Weird Tales* a memorable and accomplished story "Vengeance of Nitrocis," a Gothic tale about an Egyptian queen who avenges her pharaoh-brother's murder by drowning his enemies. Gathering them into an underwater banquet room, the queen floods her victims with "icy black water," in a cacophony of "hideous horror." The "gorgeous trumpety of banquet invaded by howling waters of death! Gayly dressed merrymakers suddenly caught in the grip of terror! Gasps and screams of the dying amid tumult and thickening dark" (Williams, *Collected Stories* 10). The narrator of "Isolated" fortuitously escapes such a fate, though admittedly not developed very far in *The Junior Life* submission.

Yet later Williams's plays explore the darker waters of the river as in "Nitrocis." The "*warm breath of the brown river beyond the river warehouses*" flows alongside the ghoulish underworld of the dead that Blanche experiences in Stanley Kowalski's Elysium Fields in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The demonic horrors in *Orpheus Descending* are played out in Williams's fictional Two River County. Terrifying floods of a rising Mississippi River swallow the Ravenstock plantation at the end of *Kingdom of Earth*, and the Rev. T. Lawrence Shannon contemplates suicide through a long swim to China in *The Night of the Iguana*. "Isolated" also demands comparison with a Williams's poem, "The Island is Memorable to Us," first published in *New Directions Twelve* and subsequently included in Williams's *In The Winter of Cities*. Another Williams's theme distantly foreshadowed

in "Isolated" relates to White Fan Island itself, first seen as a peaceful refuge and then a trap. This type of transformation lies at the heart of so much of Williams's later work where what appears as an idyllic community or location is burned, destroyed, and submerged into terror. White Fan Island is, I believe, the first of Williams's Belles Rêves.

Though written in sometimes stilted prose ("hillock of erstwhile refuge"), "Isolated" also anticipates, if only dimly, Williams's colorful style. Unquestionably, Williams had a visual imagination, seeing objects and places with a painterly eye. His language in "Isolated" is at times crisp and vivid: "cool white shores," "little stump," "bar of rock and sand," "golden rays," "brown eddies." There is even an amusing Williams pun in "my fears, however, were groundless" as the island, once a pleasant haven for an afternoon's fishing, becomes engulfed by the rising river.

"Isolated" should be recorded, and appreciated, as Tennessee Williams's first extant published short story. In this much abbreviated adventure tale, an early adolescent Williams is striving to learn the writer's craft. He confronts many of the elements—a strong (even foreboding) sense of place, vivid imagery, plot, character—that he would master in his later plays, novels, and short fiction. It is no wonder that for this juvenilia written at Ben Blewett Junior High School Williams was hailed by his classmates as "Tom Williams—Our literary boy" (Leverich 74). His vocation, like all the world, lay before him with the promise of pleasant and inviting shores and yet with the fear of a lifetime doomed to isolation.⁴

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Notes

¹Allean Hale, "Tennessee Williams's St. Louis Blues," *Mississippi Quarterly* 48. 4 (Fall 1995). Allean Hale served as a resource person for Leverich's material about Blewett. I am grateful to her for reading an earlier draft of my article and for giving me the benefit of her criticism.

²Leverich gives readers only a taste of "Isolated" by printing just three sentences from it.

³I am grateful to Mr. Tom Erhardt of Casarotto Ramsay Limited of London and the Tennessee Williams Estate for permission to quote "Isolated."

⁴I should like to thank Marie Concannon and Linda Brown-Kubisch at the State Historical Society of Missouri and Emily Miller at the Missouri Historical Society for their assistance in helping me locate the documents upon which this article is based.

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