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Foreword to “His Father’s House”

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Williams’s previously unpublished story, entitled “His Father’s House,” is a typescript located at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas. To the best of my knowledge this is the only extant copy of the story, and I have found no other variations under different titles at other repositories. Since the story is undated, one can only speculate as to when it was written. However, there are a couple of clues that might offer an approximate date of composition.

¶12 First, the story is signed “Thomas Lanier Williams,” which suggests that it was written prior to 1938, when Williams acquired his *nom de plume*. Secondly, Williams scholar Allean Hale sees certain thematic parallels between “His Father’s House” and a short story written around 1937, entitled “De Preachuh’s Boy,” which also features an African American character and contains religious elements. In this respect both of these unpublished stories adumbrate “Desire and the Black Masseur,” which was written in 1946.

¶13 Another interesting possibility for dating this story occurs when looking at a writing workshop that Williams audited under Professor Robert Ramsay at The University of Missouri around 1929. Ramsay assigned his students the task of writing pieces that featured African Americans, and this story could have been one that Williams wrote for his class. While at Missouri Williams also wrote his story “Big Black,” a fascinating study of desire and self-loathing focusing on an African American road crew worker in the vicinity of Jackson, Mississippi. Williams submitted this story for a contest at Missouri, and Professor Ramsay wrote Williams a letter to his home in St. Louis indicating his admiration for the story and his hope that it would be published. With “Big Black” Williams said that he was “returning to reminiscences of my native locale for inspiration,” and with “His Father’s House” he may have been thinking back upon his tortured days at the Eugene Field Elementary School in St. Louis for the story’s inspiration—a period when he was ridiculed for his southern accent and somewhat effete mannerisms. As with the boy who narrates the story, Williams himself felt oddly displaced during these years, and this pain of alienation might have been rendered into the demented world of the narrator.

¶14 Other autobiographical details emerge during the course of the story, such as the narrator’s clumsy dancing with the girl (Williams’s sister Rose tried to teach him how to dance), his fascination with the crucifix (surely related to Williams’s adoration of his grandfather Dakin, an Episcopal priest), and the frightful image of the absent father (parallel with Williams’s fear of his own father, Cornelius). In addition, the last haunting line of the story, “Every man must live in his father’s house,” resonates with Williams’s own irrefragable burden of heredity, as his paternal bloodline bequeathed him the predisposition of alcoholism. Although the story might not rank among Williams’s more mature, accomplished short fiction, his adroit handling of tone, voice, and unsettling subject matter in “His Father’s House” demonstrates a young writer whose imaginative power, even in its nascent period, still manages to engage as well as disturb the reader.